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A Conversation with Jane Smiley

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A CONVERSATION WITH JANE SMILEY

On 6 April 2001, novelist and professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Jonis Agee introduced Jane Smiley, the keynote speaker for the “5 Voices, One Place” symposium.

JONIS AGEE

JANE SMILEY: LOCATION AND A GEOGRAPHER OF LOVE

In her essay on place, Eudora Welty points out that “Henry James once said there isn’t any difference between ‘the English novel’ and ‘the American novel,’ since there are only two kinds of novels at all: the good and the bad.” Then Welty responds to him stating that for good novels “fiction is all bound up in the local. The internal reason for that is surely that *feelings* are bound up in place. . . . The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of ‘What happened? Who’s here? Whose coming?’—and that is the heart’s field.”¹

In fact, the novelist shares the real estate agent’s mantra: location, location, location.

Novelist Jane Smiley writes with great authority of people whose lives are so profoundly connected to place that they must ultimately yield to their heart’s purposes. Thus place is an agency of personal revelation. As the author of *A Thousand Acres*, in fact, Smiley has been credited with laying the major foundation piece for the Renaissance, the flowering, in the literature of the North American heartland that has occurred over the past fifteen years.

Jane Smiley is the author of over ten major works of fiction, including her celebrated first novel *Barn Blind*, *The Age of Grief*, *The Greenlanders*, *Ordinary Love and Good Will*, *A Thousand Acres*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, *Moo*, *The All-True Travels and Adven-*

tures of Liddie Newton, and *Horse Heaven*. She has also written essays for magazines such as *Vogue*, *The New Yorker*, *Practical Horseman*, *Harper’s*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *The New York Times* travel section, *US News*, *Victoria*, *Mirabella*, *Allure*, *The Nation*, and many others. She has written on politics, farming, horse training, child-rearing, literature, impulse buying, Barbie, marriage, Monica Lewinsky, and even the trials and tribulations of getting dressed. She is a Vassar graduate and holds an M.F.A. and a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. She taught at Iowa State University from 1981 until 1996 and now lives in California with her three children, three dogs, and at least sixteen horses.

Parents and children are often at the heart of Smiley’s writing. Very few writers are her equal in capturing the day-to-day truths of family life. And no one writes family tension as well—whether that life is in the uncompromising rooms of the horse ranch in *Barn Blind*; in the trackless reaches of medieval Greenland; on the thousand acres of Larry Cook’s place in Zebulon country in *A Thousand Acres*; in the Kansas-Missouri backwoods borderland traveled by the adventurous Liddie Newton; or among the stars and stumblebums who populate the racetracks of *Horse Heaven*.

The word that comes to mind in describing Jane Smiley’s work is a good Renaissance word: *chicanery*. It’s the chicanery of an aging

father trying to outwit his fate in *A Thousand Acres*, the chicanery of a university professor trying to hide his strange and wonderful hog-breeding experiment in *Moo*, the plotting of a widow to avenge her murdered husband in *Liddie Newton*, and the schemes of racetrack people to make one big killing on a horse. Jane Smiley's novels are the work of a true scandal-monger, reminiscent of Charles Dickens. They're tapestries of planners and schemers, the doers and the done-to, the winners and the if-onlies, the dreamers and the damned, the why's and the why-not's.

In the end, though, Jane Smiley's work is almost always about two old-fashioned

things: the war between pride and love. Not the kind of love we see celebrated in super-market paperbacks, but the awkward, clumsy, inchoate love that goes beyond words, and the pride that threatens and lames that love. Smiley is the chronicler of the heart's battles with itself, the geographer of love. With masterful prose, dialogue as keen as a scalpel's edge, and exuberant tenderness, Jane Smiley has proved time and again that she knows where we live, and we are richer for it.

NOTE

1. Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," in *The Eye at the Storm* (New York: Vintage, 1979), pp. 116, 118.

JANE SMILEY

IT AIN'T THE EIFFEL TOWER

A friend of mine told me this story about Nebraska a little while ago. He was coming home to Monterey [California] from New York. He got on the plane and a woman was sitting there with her head in her hands. As the plane took off he said, "What's the problem?" She said, "You know, I'm so terrified of flying that I have never flown in a plane before. This is the first time in my whole life." She was in her forties. He said, "Well, why are you flying now?" And she said, "Well, my mother lives in California and she's very ill and I need to go see her and this is the only way I can go." My friend is a psychotherapist, and he said he would work with her while they were flying to relieve her fear of flying. So he worked with her for two hours or so, maybe two and a half hours—he's a good psychotherapist worker. And finally she looked out the window, and she had never had that experience of looking out the window of an airplane in her whole life. The first thing she said after she looked out the window was, "What's that?"

And what it was was those big circular irrigation circles in Nebraska. I think that's a wonderful story about what you can see from space. And it ain't the Eiffel Tower.

A THOUSAND ACRES

I'm not going to read from *Horse Heaven* since none of that takes place at Aksarben [Nebraska's largest race track]. It could have. I have this twenty-seven-year-old brood mare that I always say ran when *Man of War* was still alive, but really, no. But she did win her only stakes at Aksarben, so she gets to be a very fancy horse, a black tie horse, because she won some stakes race at Aksarben twenty-four years ago.

I've chosen a selection from *A Thousand Acres*. I'll read about place and talk about my sense of the Plains as a place. And then what we'll do is questions and answers. That should open the discussion. This is from the beginning of Chapter 18 of *A Thousand Acres*, pp. 131-35²:

[The selection Dr. Smiley read from *A Thousand Acres* concerned the early days of the farm in Zebulon County that is at the center of the novel. The passage dealt with how the thousand acres came to be purchased and expanded by the narrator's grandfather and father, as well as lessons that were taught the children: "work hard," "respect your elders," "don't tell your neighbors your business," and "luck is something you make yourself."]

I realize that the pothole prairie isn't really the Great Plains, but it kind of looks like it now. It didn't a hundred years ago when it was all swamp.

THE ALL-TRUE TRAVELS OF LIDDIE NEWTON

Let's consider *The All-True Travels of Liddie Newton*, which of course takes place in Kansas, and this part of the novel takes place after Liddie returns from Lawrence. Her husband has been killed by some Southern rights activists—let's put it that way—and she is supposed to go back now to her family in Illinois, but she has a different plan. Her plan is to find the killers and take revenge. And so this is the beginning of Chapter 19 called "I Go Among the Enemy," pp. 283-90³. It takes place in the summer of 1856.

[The selection Dr. Smiley read from *The All-True Travels of Liddie Newton* was set in Kansas City, and focused on Liddie's efforts to gain passage to St. Louis on the steamboat *The Missouri Rose*. This lengthy section explored the tensions experienced by the young widow as she tried to make her way alone in the Kansas Territory of the 1850s.]

THE BIG FLATLAND

One of the things that I've always found to be true is, I think, the Great Plains do start at Minnesota, or at Minneapolis, because I remember when I used to travel regularly from central Wisconsin to central Iowa. You'd be

in the woods for all the way across Wisconsin and up to Minnesota, up to Minneapolis, and then you'd take I-35 down through the city, and there is a moment when you were suddenly on the Plains and it was like the earth had turned and you were where the sky was. I cannot count the number of times I got caught in a tremendous torrential thunderstorm, or I saw a tremendous torrential thunderstorm, marching across the horizon. It's a very moving sight.

I was not born and bred on the Plains. I was born in Los Angeles but I was raised in Saint Louis, Missouri, which considers itself the farthest west eastern city and the farthest north southern city, and special in every way, different in every way from the rest of the state which thereby remains nameless. But I do remember that moment was quite an inspirational moment, of leaving the Big Woods and coming out onto the Big Flatland, and for me that was always a sign that I knew just sort of exactly where I was.

Now I live in California where they say, "Oh, there's a big storm coming in," and then you get a heavy mist. I know that this heavy mist is fearsome because the mountains are so steep, and any kind of moisture is going to erode them even further. But I always think, "Oh, come on." A couple of years ago, about a year and a half ago, we did get quite a lightning storm that would have done the Plains proud. The lightning just went back and forth between the ocean and the mountains for twelve hours. I remember we saw it first about five o'clock in the afternoon, and then we were still watching it at about five o'clock in the morning. This was September 8th, 1999, and as a result it started a fire in the Los Padres National Forest that burned until November. I used to think, boy, they wouldn't have one of those in the Plains, one of those fires that just burned week after week after week.

Anyway, now I live in California and no longer live in the Midwest. But people always come up to me at readings and say, "I'm from Iowa" or "I'm from Nebraska, and I read A

Thousand Acres” or “I read your work.” They’re always the most happy people in the audience. I never know what to attribute that to, whether to the fact that they were born and raised here or the fact that they got out.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: Have people ever approached you who though they recognized themselves in one of your novels and wanted a chance for rebuttal?

No. When *A Thousand Acres* was first published, a woman sent me a very irate letter because there’s a line early on where Jenny remembers in the early fifties when her family got a car and the other families around were driving trucks. This woman wrote me a really irate letter saying that people didn’t drive a farm truck, that that was wrong. But I got quite a few letters from people who concurred with what I had to say, but no people that were outraged or anything like that.

Question: How was *Moo* received by your colleagues?

I think it was received with relief because they realized it wasn’t about them. But, the people who’ve been most insistent that it was about them were people from Michigan State and Purdue, places that I’ve never been, so I must have struck a chord at Michigan State or Purdue. But people at Iowa State just thought it was funny and weren’t upset in any way.

Question: How did you come to write *The Greenlanders*?

The Greenlanders you can think of sort of as North Dakota East. There’s a pattern of settlement and it goes: Norway, Greenland, Manitoba, North Dakota. I came to write *The Greenlanders* because I’ve been interested in the Icelandic sagas, and once I read

a lot of sagas and discovered that there had been a colony on the southern tip of Greenland, I thought, “Oh, how fascinating that people lived there,” and “What happened to them?” and I really wanted to investigate that. So I wrote this long novel about the end of the Norse colony in Greenland. Then when I came to write *A Thousand Acres* I knew just how those people thought because they were of the same stock.

You know, I frequently think that *A Thousand Acres* is not really—it’s an American novel, and it’s in the American literary tradition, obviously, because that’s where I live and it’s written in English, but it’s also very much in the Scandinavian literary tradition of *Giants in the Earth*, which is one of my most influential books—we read that when I was in eighth grade—and *The Immigrants*, *The Emigrants*, and books about Iceland.

I was reading an article about *A Thousand Acres* as an example of the American tradition, and the author was making a line between Jefferson and then later American agrarian writers. He was talking about the hopefulness of the American agrarian tradition and the farm, and the farm country as a kind of golden place where citizenship developed, and how that was to some extent, maybe to a great extent, undermined in *A Thousand Acres*. That reminded me that it is the Scandinavian tradition where despair on the farm resides. If you’ve ever read *Pelle the Conqueror*, which that the movie *Pelle the Conqueror* was taken from, or any of the Icelandic sagas, or any books about life on the Scandinavian farm, it’s a much crueler world, a much more morally problematic world.

In many ways, since I loved Scandinavian literature, spent a lot of time in Iceland and wrote *The Greenlanders*, this book *A Thousand Acres* is at least as much in the Scandinavian tradition as it is in the American tradition. But I thought that was appropriate because Ames, you know, northern Iowa and Minnesota are full of

Scandinavians, so it's appropriate that that book be where the American and Scandinavian traditions intersect.

Question: Can you say whether you begin with an idea, a person, a situation, or a place?

Well, not overall. I can say what began each novel, but I don't begin with the same thing each time. For example, *A Thousand Acres* began with the play *King Lear* and is in some sense a gloss or an interpretation of *King Lear*. That was its origin.

Liddie began with the Oklahoma bombing. I was in Washington, DC, the day that the federal building was bombed. I was of course like everybody very upset about that, and I came home and I wanted to write about ideology and violence in American life. I called a friend of mine who is an American historian and told him this and he said, "Oh, you ought to write about Kansas." So it wasn't until I got into the historical record that I realized how interesting Kansas was as a kind of pivotal—literally a pivot point—for American history both north and south and east and west, and how these few years in Kansas were the beginnings of the Civil War and a watershed of American history.

My interpretation of the Civil War is that although the abolitionists at the time, in 1855, thought that it was going to take another twenty-five years to get rid of slavery, the real catalyst was the culture clash when New Englanders came to Kansas and met the Missourians face to face on their own turf. Their cultures were so different they were almost diametrically opposed. The New Englanders were self-righteous and mercenary and always looked within in a kind of self-confident way to gauge what was right, and the Missourians, like many Southerners, were much more socially sensitive, and they always looked without to seek whether they were gaining respect from the people around them. They also were not educated like the New En-

glanders, so the New Englanders thought the Missourians were ignorant slobs and the Missourians thought the New Englanders were wealthy, self-righteous people who were going to tell them what to do.

Kansas was the place where these two cultures were unbuffered by the Mid-Atlantic states, and so I think that's where the Civil War started, that's where people came to hate one another for their differences. I always think that we would understand the Civil War better if we understood that it began in Kansas and not in south Carolina. So, anyway, that book started with the political idea.

Moo started with a few images, one of which was Earl Butz. Not Earl Butz the man. Though I have to say my publisher received a letter after *Moo* came out from someone who had worked with Earl Butz—Earl Butz the man—when he was working in the government, and he was incensed that someone like me would attempt to ride the coattails of Earl Butz to fame and fortune. I always thought, what's wrong with the pig in *Moo*, the character everybody loves? Wouldn't you like to have your name be the totally innocent porcine hero of a novel? I never understood why anybody would be incensed.

But anyway, Iowa State, like all universities probably—Iowa State spent many years feeding upon itself. People would come in as students and exit fifty years later as emeritus professors, and of course it developed this weird culture and a bunch of apocryphal myths. One of them was that in the sixties someone in animal science had attempted to feed a hog to see how large it would grow if it ate as much as it wanted and was allowed to get as old as it could get. People really don't know that much about how old pigs get, though after I wrote *Moo* and I was on the book tour trail a man from—it might have even been Nebraska—came up to me at a book signing and said that in the late thirties when he was a boy his father had taken him to the state fair

and they had seen the biggest hog in the world and he weighed twelve hundred pounds. He could not move because his trotters couldn't hold his weight up, so according to this man he spent all his time kind of in this half sleep because he was no longer able to move or eat or something like that.

Anyway, *Moo* came from a few of those little apocryphal stories about Iowa State. *Horse Heaven* came from just a desire to investigate the language and stories of the racetrack, which abound, as many of you know.

Question: Can you elaborate about your concept of creativity?

It always interests me how creativity abounds. The most obvious example in our day is the language of the Internet, the various words that were brought in to describe or define certain things that needed to be defined, like "Internet" itself or "World Wide Web" or "cookies," which are things that you get on your computer that make junk people be able to find you again. It's a fascinating and very humorous, humor-filled, and witty language, and it sort of mushroomed just because individual people had an idea about what to call something. I think that's a wonderful example of the natural creativity of people, and we see that all around us.

So I don't think of creativity as something special that a few people have. I think of creativity as the natural human condition. What most people have to deal with is not how to get creative but how to remove or how to give themselves permission to be creative. The creativity exists but they have second thoughts or they have doubts or they have worries or they have feelings that they can't say what they really want to say because of social pressures or whatever. So as you remove those blocks your creativity will naturally express itself.

I always used to tell my students at Iowa State that a writer is first and foremost

someone who will say anything, if only to see what the reaction is. The reaction might be shock of some kind, or disapproval or whatever, but a writer would always rather say it and listen to the reaction than not say it and remain an upstanding member of the community. So I guess that's my short answer on creativity.

Question: You were speaking about the darkness of the Scandinavian novel and the darkness of Larry's character in *A Thousand Acres*. Would you say a little bit about that?

Let me put it this way. As a person who's part Norwegian I feel like I can speak to this. And as a person who has studied a lot of Scandinavian literature. I had a conversation with a woman who was from Minnesota and had grown up in a family of Scandinavian extraction. She said that whenever anyone in the family thought they were going to express emotion of some kind they would get in the car and drive away, so that nobody would have to watch it. She also said that when the children did something good, the response of the parents was, "Well, that's what you should do. We don't build you up or praise you or make much of you when you do what you're supposed to, but we don't hesitate to smack you down if you do what you aren't supposed to do."

To me, that kind of child-raising, that kind of way of living, eventually when you get in your thirties or forties makes life seem to be one long trial and there's no reward because you're just adhering to what you should be doing, and you're not getting praise or love or anything extra for doing them even though they're difficult and become more difficult the less rewarded you are.

What I think has happened, and what happened in Scandinavian literature and has happened in many of these communities, is that what begins as, let's say, disconnection and depression ends up as a

philosophy and a world view. It's no coincidence that the Scandinavians were the only society that imagined that when the end came it would come in destruction. Everybody else in the world thought redemption was just around the corner and the Scandinavians thought that the evil guys were going to break their bonds and overwhelm everything and the Valkyries and the warriors and the gods were going to come up short and that would be it and darkness would fall and that would be the end of the world.

That's a world view that's practically unique. As many of you know, when Saint Olaf went to convert the Norwegians he often did it by beating them to death with the crucifix, because he figured they were better off saved and dead than reformed. And so it's funny when we talk about it, but when you have elevating a mood of, let's say, despair into a philosophy of universal destruction, then the way that you live your life, even in the smallest ways, on the farm or in the town, it's always looking for the thing that indicates that the destruction of the world is about to happen. Is this the first step to the end?

One of the things Jenny says in *A Thousand Acres* is that when they sit down and play Monopoly there's a difference in the way everybody plays. The farm kids play very cautiously, because they don't want to lose anything that they already have. The kids from the other parts of the country play much more boldly because they think there's something to be gained. But the farm kids don't think there's anything to be gained.

Question: Does this philosophy come from where the core of a people are created?

He's speculating that the fact that Scandinavian population lives very far north is the reason for this. I think that's absolutely clear. They settled this northern tier that's considered uninhabitable by most of the

world. So it's not like . . . they didn't go eagerly to South Carolina.

Question: I was wondering if you might say something about horses, maybe how horses have helped you become accustomed to a place or how they might have affected your perception of a place.

I think horses are a place. Horses are like a concentration of the natural world that is within your grasp, or at least within your vicinity. They're very enigmatic. They have to be treated with care and respect because they outweigh you by ten times.

I always think that the horses that people have, either quickly or slowly, but always, come to mirror that person's approach to the natural world. Somebody was quoting to me the writer Tom McGuane, who loves cutting horses, and he had been quoted as saying that if one of his horses bit him, he, the horse, would find himself knocked flat to the ground so fast that he wouldn't know what had happened and when he got up he would be much more respectful.

That approach really astounded me because I would never approach one of my horses that way. I always think that a person who thinks horses need to be dominated will find that his horses always need to be dominated. A person who thinks his horses will cooperate with him will find always that his horses, eventually at any rate, will cooperate with him or her.

So horses are very agreeable in the sense that they always agree with you about who they are, and if you think that they are nasty, dangerous beasts, then they will be nasty, dangerous beasts. But I also think that horses are very mysterious, and people spend their entire lives investigating the psyche of a horse, or of many horses. I think that's actually a wonderful life to live.

As for how horses and places fit in, I love thoroughbreds and thoroughbreds aren't universally distributed, but I find the places I like to be, like Maryland and Ken-

tucky and Virginia and California and England and Ireland and those kind of places, are places where thoroughbreds are.

One of the wonderful things about horses is that clustered about them is a very archaic Anglo-Saxon language that has words like "poll" for the top of their head and "fetlock" for one of their ankles and "stifle" and "withers." I've loved horses since I was a child, and I think the words around horses is one of the things I've loved, that there was this strange language about them that you had to learn. It was not Latinate, and it was a very old language. It's not French. It's all German. You know, if we talk about "pork" and "lamb" and "swine" and "beef" and "cows," it's half French and half English. But when we talk about horses, it's all German, it's all Germanic. So that's another thing that makes it seem even more archaic and more a gift from the distant past.

Question: Seems like places are an important part of your novels. I think of Kathleen Norris and her spiritual geography. Could your novels have been written somewhere else, or is there a certain spirituality or personality to these novel?

Well, none of the novels could have been written anywhere else than they were written. But I could have written novels anywhere, because my sense of place has to do with where I am. It doesn't have to do with where I feel at home. I feel at home everywhere, but in fact the place that I think is the most beautiful on earth is the Catskill Mountains north of New York, Delaware, and around Delaware County. I've never written about that hardly at all.

My novels have been contingent in the sense that they grew out of where I happened to be. I happened to be there for circumstances like getting into graduate school, getting a job, or whatever. Every time that I was there, I looked around and said, "Oh, what's interesting about this

place, what appeals to me about this place?"

I currently live in Carmel Valley, California, which has a lot of interesting features and one of them is that there's a lot of wildlife there. For California it's quite a rural place. I remember listening to the radio and they were giving the traffic report in San Jose and they said there was a traffic jam on Carmel Valley Road because lots of people have stopped to watch a cow give birth. And then these people from San Jose just love to laugh and laugh because they thought that was so funny.

Question: What portion of your time do you spend on research compared to writing?

I spend enough time on research to be able to talk the talk, but not to be able to write a dissertation about it. I usually get about half to two-thirds of the research done before I start writing and then while I'm writing I keep doing research. Then eventually the research peters out and I finish writing the book. And then I go back and check things or send the book around to experts.

You know, I never worry about getting caught up in the history. I always feel that the true facts should inspire you, they shouldn't daunt you. So what went on, or as far as we know what went on, is a way to go on with your work. It's not something that should stifle your work. Because if you bring your own agenda to history, then you won't learn anything, you'll just re-create. It's like getting married seven times to a similar type of guy. You'll just re-create the same problems that you had in your first novel. But if you actually pay attention to what happened, then the facts of history talk back to you and you can write something that's actually different from your earlier work.

NOTES

1. Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991) pp. 131-35.
2. Jane Smiley, *The All-True Travels of Liddie Newton* (New York: Ballentine) pp. 283-90.