INTERVIEW

When craft & storytelling come TOGETHER

Award-winning fiction writer Lee Smith builds on her Southern traditions in bringing characters and settings to life

By Elfrieda Abbe

As a child, Lee Smith would sit on the front porch for hours with her grandmother, mother, father, aunts and uncles and listen to stories about life in their small mining town nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The rhythm and texture of their Appalachian expressions, the richness of their layered stories, and the combination of lore and history would lay the foundation for Smith's writing and give her one of the South's most distinctive voices.

Many of Smith's novels and short stories harken back to those delicious, meandering accounts of daily events. She was fascinated by the way lives could turn on a small decision, and the mystery that lies between truth and myth. When you read her novels, it's as if you, too, were on the front porch listening to storytellers like Granny Younger, who gives a rambling account of a tragic tale in *Oral History*, a novel covering several generations in an Appalachian community, or like Harriet Holding, who in *The Last Girls* vividly recalls escapades with her college roommate and reflects on their relationship.

Smith favors first person, but also likes to mix it up with third-person narration, diary passages, letters and even poetry. Whatever she chooses to use, she takes the reader inside the character's head.

Bryan Regan Photography, Raleigh, N.C.

Being a good storyteller doesn't necessarily translate to being a good writer, says Lee Smith. Writing means making a host of important craft decisions.

Having grown up in the oral tradition, Smith is a natural storyteller, but she would be the first to say that writing a good story is not the same as telling one. When Smith was a college student, majoring in English literature at Hollins College in Roanoke, Va., she struggled, like many young writers, at finding her writer's voice. Because she looked at writing as a serious endeavor, she thought it required important or dramatic events described in formal, third-person English. It wasn't until she read such Southern authors as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and James Still that she realized she could write stories about the struggles of plain folk who spoke like the people she grew up around.

Once she let her characters speak for themselves, she found her own voice. The result was her first novel, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, a coming-of-age story written while she was still a student.

Ten novels, three short-story collections and many awards later, Smith hasn't strayed far from her roots. She lives in Hillsborough, N.C., with her husband. She spoke to me by telephone from her cabin on Laurel Mountain in Ashe County, N.C., the setting for *On Agate Hill*.

"I've had this cabin for 25 years," she said. "I'm sitting up here on this mountain, and there's not anybody here but me."

Sounds like just the perfect writer's retreat.

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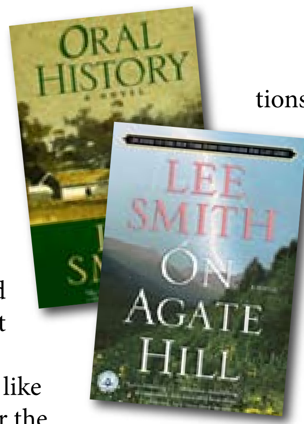
You often talk about the Appalachian oral tradition you grew up with. Could you discuss how storytelling has influenced you?

My sense of a story comes with a human voice. I was often on my grandmother's porch with my parents, aunts, uncles and everybody —that whole older generation—and they would just carry on, telling stories all night long. I went to sleep hearing this.

Even when I'm writing [in] third person, it's like somebody speaking in my ear. I can always hear the voices. If I can't, I don't write it. It's the people that interest me.



In your bio, you write that everyone in your family—especially your parents—had a gift for telling great stories. How is putting a story down on paper different?

I have known a number of people who were really great storytellers, and they're not writers. The biggest difference is that they use their facial expressions, their body language and their gestures. Putting it down on paper really is a completely different thing. People don't understand this. They'll say, "Well, you know so and so, he ought to write a book. He's such a good storyteller."

Being a writer is really all about craft. It takes years and years to learn. At some point we have to very seriously address the issue of how we are going to do this. What point of view will we choose? Where will the story start? What is it about? We have to think very carefully about those things.

In *Oral History* you use multiple first-person narrators, with a few parts of the narrative in third person. Why did you choose this structure?

It was a long, evolutionary process. First of all, I should say that this novel was the book I always wanted to write, but I could never figure out the form of it. I really wanted to honor and preserve the language, the legends, the history, the witch tales and the mythic nature of those early characters, you know, those older people that I had known. I wanted to have everybody speak the way I had heard them speak. I wanted to write a book that would use the Appalachian speech.

[At first,] I had in mind that this would be a big book; it would go down these generations; and it would show how the land and the people changed. That made me think it had to be real serious. Therefore, it had to be third person, like a history book.

I wrote at least 100 pages of the first draft in standard third person, *Norton Anthology of Literature* English. I realized after a while that it sounded as if the writer were condescending to her characters. There was too much of a discrepancy between my [characters] and the way they speak and the third-person narration. It made them sound dumb. It made them all sound like they were on *Hee Haw.* At that point I decided that the characters had to tell their own stories, so I let them talk. It's always like pulling teeth for me to write third person, anyway. As soon I began to let my characters speak, the writing of the book just took off, and it was all I could do to keep up.

What about the sections that you wrote in third person?

There were times when I wanted to bring a certain amount of exposition in. When, for example, there was a group scene at the burying ground [where people gathered for the funeral of one of the main characters]. There were so many people I wanted to mention, and so many kinds of information I wanted to bring to it, that first person would have been very limiting.

The reader sees events unfold through the eyes of many narrators, which gives *Oral History* a texture it might not have had had the story been told from one point of view. Was that your intent?

I had been doing real oral history work for years. I would tape everybody and write stuff down and so on. I was fascinated with the idea that there is really no such thing as history or there is no such thing as one story. It's always the storyteller's story.

[For example], I was going to write something about the last hanging in the public square in [Grundy, Va.]. I interviewed a number of people who had family stories about the event. If you interview seven different people, you get seven completely different stories. I was fascinated with how legends get started.

Another thing I was doing was examining the nature of stories: how they happen, how they get started, and how and why they're

THE LEE SMITH FILE

- Lee Smith grew up among a family of storytellers in Grundy, Va., a coal-mining town in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Her father operated a dime store, and her mother was a home-economics teacher.
- She wanted to be a writer as long as she can remember. "I wrote my first novel on my mother's stationary when I was 8," she writes on her Web site, www.leesmith.com. "It featured as main characters my two favorite people at that time: Adlai Stevenson and Jane Russell. In my novel, they fell in love and went West together in a covered wagon. Once there, they became—inexplicably—Mormons!"
- She attended Hollins College in Roanoke, Va., where she and fellow student Annie Dillard became go-go dancers for an all-girl rock band, the Virginia Woolfs.
- She has published 11 novels and three short-story collections. She received an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Award, The Robert Penn Warren Prize for Fiction, the Weatherford Award for Appalachian literature, and two O. Henry Awards.

carried on. The best we can do is collect a number of stories about the same event and then decide, "OK, well, this is probably more or less what happened, but we can never know. I mean, the past is ultimately so mysterious. [For more about how Smith uses different points of view, go to www.WriterMag.com and click on Online Extra.]

You look at history in *On Agate Hill* as well. How did you research this period piece, which takes place during the Civil War and Reconstruction?

I talked to a whole bunch of people up here [in Ashe County, N.C.] who [like the main character] had taught in a one-room school. Then I immersed myself for a couple of years in diaries and letters. What was life like then? It just fascinates me. That was the only absolute historical novel that I've ever done.

Could you describe your writing process?

Before I actually start writing [the story or novel], I do an awful lot of what I call prewriting. Initially, one of the reasons I did this was that when I had children, my actual time to write fiction was very limited. I would spend a lot of little bits of time just jotting down everything I could think of. The more I would write, the more I would finally get a sense of what was going to happen. So by the time I got some hours stacked up and had a baby sitter or a day off from work, I would be able to just write rather than be figuring it out.

How does prewriting help you with characters and plot?

I start with the characters, and I just get to know them really, really well. I know what they think, fear and love, what motivates them, what they want. I think about them until I know how they would spend every day of their normal lives. Then I write the story about the day on which something different happens. In other words, some conflict, something comes into their life, you know, something new.

Annie Dillard once described these necessary preparations more succinctly: "Before you can make a dress, you've got to get your yard goods!"—and you better get enough, is my feeling.

In addition to prewriting, you use diagrams of the setting before you start the novel. How does that work?

I'm a writer for whom place is very important. I have to have maps of everything. With *Oral History,* I had a big map that I'd drawn out on the wall. I was using the actual names of places that are in the county I was from. It had the Hurricane Mountains, Hoot Owl Mountain and Holler, Grassy Creek, Black Rock Mountain and the Dismal River. All these are real, but I made my own map to suit my [fictional] purposes for the story.

Even for my contemporary short stories, I have to draw the house, the town, or the interior of the house. I just have to have it all set up somehow, then I can just release my characters into it. Often they will do things that will surprise me, things that weren't in their outlines, and they'll go places that aren't in their maps.

What kinds of exercises do you give your students?

I think prewriting is very helpful with introductory writing classes because it's valuable to actually have to think about characters, character development and plot. I also always have my writing students read a good deal, and then we take the story apart from the point of a view of being a writer and [talk about] why the writer would make this choice. Then I will have them do exercises with point of view. You know, write the same thing from three different points of view: omniscient, close third person and first person. Then we do simple things like write a scene in which something important is not being said.

What do you mean by close third person?

It's third person but written real close to the characters, which is the way I love to write, as opposed to omniscient third person. I can hear the voice. [It has] immediacy, a sense that someone is really telling you a story.

You don't use Appalachian dialect in all of your books, but when you do, it sounds natural and unobtrusive. How do you keep it from getting in the way of the reader?

This language, this very precise, poetic

Exercises from Lee Smith

A STORY HAS three parts: beginning, middle and end. This is so basic that we often don't even mention it—but it's very important. When I first started submitting stories for publication, they were always rejected with the notation "lack of development" or "not fully developed." Finally, while attending a workshop taught by the great North Carolina writer and teacher Doris Betts, I grasped the fact that what this criticism meant was that these stories had no middle.

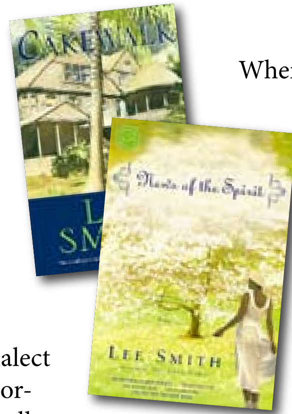
In each, I had spent a great deal of time and care writing the all-important beginning, which introduced the characters, setting and conflict, etc.—then, exhausted, rushed right ahead pell-mell into my long-planned ending. There was no escalation—no middle, no space or time for my reader to get to know these characters well enough to truly care what happened to them.

So now I like to give my own students some assignments that force them to think in structural terms, such as these three story ideas:

1. A relationship ends badly.
2. A person is forced to give up a cherished belief.
3. A long-kept secret is revealed.

All these ideas imply a beginning, middle and ending—another way to look at it is: situation, change, result.

Appalachian dialect, is what I heard as a child. And I really do believe that your first language puts a stamp on you some way or another. I love the precision of the language [with expressions such as] "set-along child," for a child who can't yet crawl away but who can sit at the end of the row while you hoe your corn, and "shirt-tale boy" for a toddler not yet wearing long pants. All these [phrases] are so precise and so beautiful.



When I do Appalachian dialect or any other dialect that's not standard American speech, it's very important to understate it and *not* to use phonetic misspellings, not to drop the "g" and use an apostrophe—*thinkin'*. Let the sense of dialect—whether it's Appalachian, African-American, Hispanic—come from the word choice and the rhythm of the speech and very little in the way of phonetic misspelling. Then the reader gets it. But if the reader has to stop and read it like it's another language, then you lose the reader.

You use another form of precise language in *The Last Girls* by inserting poetry into the story. It seems a risky choice for a novel. How did the decision to use poems come about?

In the novel, the character Baby was a student poet [in the 1960s]. But then, of course, Baby's dead by the time the novel starts and her friends are taking this trip down the Mississippi [in her memory]. Her friends are carrying a lot of emotional baggage, for which she was sort of the catalyst. But she didn't have a voice in the present.

I'll never forget this. It was so odd. I had been writing all morning. I went out to sit in the sun. All of a sudden these poems came to me in Baby's voice, and I just started writing them down. I was writing in my checkbook, and finally I went and got some real paper. They just kept coming. I thought, "OK, she wants to have a voice in this novel." So I stopped writing the book for a while and wrote Baby's poems. It helped so much. She was the most vivid character and yet she wasn't in it. Poetry goes right to the heart of the matter.

Your bio states that you are an insatiable reader, and you have quite an extensive reading list on your Web site, www.leesmith.com. How has reading helped you?

In finding your own voice, it's important to find the work of someone else whose experience has been sort of like yours, who's trying to say something like what you're trying to say. It helps to recognize it and see how they did it. For me, it was very important when I first read Eudora Welty in college. I wanted to write, but I felt I had to have a much more glamorous and exotic life before I could begin. When I read her, I was just dumbstruck because I thought, with this awful arrogance of a 19-year-old, "Well, my goodness, she hadn't been anywhere much, either." The stories were simple, about plain people, and nothing much happened. And yet they were so wonderful.

When I stumbled upon the Appalachian writer James Still, I saw that my experiences and my native tongue could be literature. You know people always tell you to write what you know, but the problem is you don't know what you know until you see it. You need to have a model, something to aim for.

What are you working on now?

I thought it was going to be a short story, but it keeps going and going. It's about Zelda Fitzgerald. It's about the time she spent at Highland Hospital in Asheville, up here in the mountains of North Carolina. My father was in that mental hospital and so was my son, so that's a place that I really know. I'm so interested in what psychiatry was at that time and how patients were treated.

Then, like everybody else, I'm in love with Zelda, and so it's been this great pleasure to immerse myself in biographies and books about Scott and Zelda, in all of his work and in her novel *Save Me the Waltz*. I have no idea if I'll even publish it, but it's fascinating to me.

What advice do you have for writers?

For me, the one thing that is so interesting is the process itself. The actual writing is what I love, learning and figuring it out. Even revision. I love revision because the story becomes clearer and clearer. Somebody asked me if I have unpublished novels. I sure do. They were the books I was trying to write because I thought they would sell, and this was at particular times when I thought I wanted to make some money. I gave that idea up.

"I start with the characters, and I just get to know them really, really well. ... Then I write the story about the day on which something different happens."

That's important for new writers to think about. How are you going to support yourself, because writing is not going to support you, at least not for many years. People who want to write have to put some serious thought into where the time is going to come from and how they are going to support this habit. Many of us teach. I feel about this the way I feel about doing prewriting. Make your plans so that this thing can happen.

Elfrieda Abbe

Elfrieda Abbe is publisher of *The Writer*. She has interviewed many authors for the magazine, including Rick Bragg, Margaret Drabble, Alan Furst and Ian Frazier.

For more insights from Lee Smith, as well as her recent reading list and a list of her novels, go to *The Writer* Web site and click on Online Extra.