

# Lee Smith Interview

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Don Noble is the host of Alabama Public Television's BookMark and professor of English at the University of Alabama. Noble interviewed novelist and short story writer Lee Smith in the fall of 1999. Here are excerpts from that interview.

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Noble: I really appreciate your taking the time to come in today.

Smith: It's always fun to come back to Alabama.

Noble: A lot of our viewers may not know as much about your life as your readers know, lots of them. Your fictional home place is your real home place — Grundy, Virginia.

Smith: Uh huh.

Noble: What was that like in the '40s when you were a little girl there?

Smith: Well, I think it's safe to say that it was one of the most remote areas in this country. It's a tiny town deep in the Appalachian Mountains, in the coal mining Appalachian region of Southwest Virginia. It was completely isolated geographically from every place. It was just real hard to get to. We never went out. So, consequently, we were culturally isolated, and educationally isolated, and in terms of healthcare and all kinds of things. Yet that made it a very special place to grow up. Of course, when I was growing up there I was just dying to leave.

Noble: Were you?

Smith: You know, just like all kids are. I mean I had cousins living on every side of me and was conscious of what a hillbilly I was. But later I came to understand that that was really one of the most privileged upbringings, the most interesting place that I probably would ever be.

Noble: Culturally it was a distinct place.

Smith: Absolutely distinct culturally. One aspect that has fascinated me so much since is the language. Because I think all writers are molded by the way we first hear language. And I heard this rich, picturesque speech that I cherish. And I think that we all need to cherish. And I think that

we all need to cherish everything that is regional, and different, and special. Everything that doesn't sound like it's overheard in a mall in Cincinnati. I was raised by a lot of older people, too. And my daddy would say things like *a creek coming down the mountain, turkey tails out in the bottom*. Use these wonderful sayings like all the kinds of words for the age of a child, like a "knee baby." Or a "little set-along" child that you put at the end of a row of corn when you were hoeing corn. Or a "shirttail boy." It was just more specific and beautiful, like African-American English. So I was real lucky for hearing that.

Noble: Organic imagery. Imagery that was for everyday use.

Smith: That's right. That's right and I heard it and I grew up with wonderful music. Very privileged with the music, and just this whole very specific Appalachian culture. And I was the last generation because then TV came in. That changes everything.

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Noble: When I talk to writers, very often there is a story of how long and hard the process was of getting that first book into print. But that is not going to be your story, is it? Tell the story of your first book. You wrote a novel as an undergraduate, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*.

Smith: Yeah, I wrote a novel as an undergraduate mainly because I had been kicked out of school and I needed six hours of credit in the worst possible way. And my teacher, Louis Rubin, said, "Why don't you just write a novel?" And so I said all right. And I wrote a novel. And it was a simple novel because it was from the point of view of a nine-year-old child whose parents are breaking up, and she creates a fictional world to live in for a while which is more comforting for her than the real world. I had written several stories with this kind of viewpoint character that is this deeply weird, imaginative child, and it was pretty easy to expand her story into a novel. And I did, and through what I almost think of as a fluke, it was actually published

several years later. I've thought a lot about this because if that novel were being sent out for publication today nobody would take it. I mean there are so many fewer serious literary novels being published today and that's what they consider a "quiet" novel. I was very lucky to break into print at that point. I did have a kind of dry period later on that other novelists usually have at the beginning. And I was ready to quit.

Noble: I have seen it in print, people talk about "the two careers of Lee Smith."

Smith: To my mind, a writer is a person who is writing rather than a person who is publishing. But what happened is I published three novels. They did well, critically, and sold nothing. Publishing those novels was like throwing them out the window into the ocean. After that, publishing *itself* began to change and began to be looking a lot more at the bottom line. So when I wrote my fourth novel, which was a depressing book, *Black Mountain Breakdown*, deeply dark, with a lot of ambivalence and a dark ending, they just said, "Sorry, honey. We haven't made any money on you so far and this is really depressing and we are not going to do this." That is what Harper and Row said, which published my first three.

Noble: Well, whether there are two "careers" or not, I mean there is a difference between the first four and the ones since. The first four are dark, and they are traumatic. And the heroines are tortured girls who have been secretly raped by their uncle. Or have nervous breakdowns or are in some sort of pain.

Smith: The heroines are not what you'd call self-realized women, right? I mean, there is a certain way in which I think I've sort of written fiction almost like other people write in their journals. 'Cause I started so young and I've done it so continuously. I think what was happening was I was also growing up. I was into a very painful first marriage and then out of it, and then on my own and then feeling more confident as I went on through my thirties, and I think this kind of thing is probably reflected in my work.

Noble: Those characters are not married women with small children. They are nine-year-olds, ten-, eighteen-year-olds.

Smith: They are nine-year-olds...but, I think, particularly in the South, and I'm hoping this is changing, but in the South, it was hard for a lot of us women, for a long time, to not be "girls." To not write about "girls." To understand what it would be to be a woman, to be making your own decisions, all your own decisions, and so on. So I think maybe I was writing about girls because I was sort of psychologically not able to grow up as fast as I needed to. But I think it was hard. We were raised to please and to be good wives, and be this or that, and it was hard suddenly to begin to take yourself seriously. I mean for years if I was seated on a plane next to somebody, and they said what do you do for a living, I never said I was a writer.

Noble: No?

Smith: For years I didn't say it. I would say, "Oh, I'm a housewife, or a mother, or I'm a teacher," and sometimes I'd just make things up, like "I'm a dietician." ...Now if anybody asks me, I say I'm a writer. But there was an evolvment in my own self-confidence and consciousness of myself. And I think it does have to do with the time and place where I was born and how I was raised, you know, to be a lady and not put yourself forward.

Noble: In your novels there is almost always a female central character. I mean that's perfectly natural. There is a big difference between the early heroines and the later ones. The biggest difference to me is not only that they are older, but also the earlier ones tend to have been raped. The females of the second half of your career are very sexually aggressive.

Smith: Yeah, they are. That's right. Well, I think they are just more able to sort of take matters into their own hands, to not feel that they should be passionless, to not feel that they should be only acted upon, or that they are the prey, or they are at the mercy of the world. Just to feel like they are acted upon rather than acting. I do think those books mirror the real generations of women coming along.

Noble: Well Ivy in *Fair and Tender Ladies* has a funny line. When Ivy actually says after she becomes pregnant something to the affect of "Now that I'm ruint..."

Smith: "It frees me up."

Noble: "Frees me up." Instead of wallowing in humiliation and shame, she is now liberated.

Smith: Right. Well keeping up appearances is very *hard*. Being a lady and keeping up appearances and all this kind of thing is very hard. It is much better to be like Ivy and just be a natural person in the world.

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Noble: The other big issue, I think, that distinguishes the second four of your works from the first four is that the second four are wildly multigenerational.

Smith: I think the older you get, you get this sense, or I have gotten this sense, that life is so much more complex. So much more complicated. We are all so much more inter-related to other people and to events than I ever had any notion of as a younger person. I think when you start getting older you get more interested in the long haul. I get really interested in people and who their parents were and who *their* parents were and how certain traits play out down through the generations and how certain things about where they live influence what kinds of people they become and we become. The field of my interest has expanded a whole lot. There is a point at which suddenly you don't see yourself as central at all. You just see yourself as just that little part of the whole thing. It is very vivid, very liberating to me.

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Noble: Which of your books do you think of as your favorite? Which one is your baby?

Smith: There are two that are my babies actually. One of them is

*Fair and Tender Ladies* because just speaking as a working writer, you can never separate the book that you write from the circumstances of your life. When I was writing *Fair and Tender Ladies*, everyone in my family was really sick. My mother was dying, she had emphysema; it was a long, drawn-out thing, but I was right there. One of my sons was very, very sick, and my dad was real sick. When I began writing that book the main character, Ivy Rowe, started getting stronger and stronger because I was falling apart and I really needed a role model. Somehow, having that book to write settled me for the two years that this was going on. It was like this enormous source of strength. I got this fetish sort of thing that if I finished the book my mother would die so I kept not finishing it. I kept writing real, real slow towards the end. And then finally, my mother did die, and then I finished the book two days later.

And then another one, and I can't tell you why except for the intensity with which it literally wrote itself, was *Saving Grace*. It is sort of like a book that had just been given to me as a gift. Up comes this voice and the voice just says, "All you have to do is sit down." Just put yourself in front of your typewriter, put yourself in front of your legal pad, and the book will write itself. But I also enjoyed writing *The Devil's Dream* because I love country music so much, and I was all over the South doing research. I was riding the buses with Kitty Wells. I was backstage at the Opry. I just had the best time.

Noble: To change directions, you've written about religion in a lot of different ways. If I sat down to write an article called "Religion in the Fiction of Lee Smith," it would be a very complicated article.

Smith: I think our actual experience of religious life, of our spiritual self, is enormously complicated. There are a lot of frauds. There is a lot of chicanery. There is a lot of junk out there. But I'm one of those people who has always very definitely felt personally this religious impulse. When I was a kid, I used to embarrass my mother by rededicat-

ing my life all the time and jumping into the little pool, in the little tent behind the big tent, and coming home dripping wet all over the linoleum. "Get out," she'd say. I have always been interested in ecstatic religions of all kinds. But terrified of it myself. It's like the idea of, well, if you are born again in those terms, who are you? Are you gone? You lose yourself, I mean. I think one reason that I wrote *Saving Grace*, and *Saving Grace* means a lot to me, is just because I am too cautious a person. I think I just wanted that experience vicariously so I wrote the book.

Noble: But Grace's father is not finally, to me, a nice man.

Smith: He is not a nice man at all. But he damned sure feels the spirit in a certain way. He is dangerous. And this is the thing that I can never resolve. But also that book to me is about *children*, the powerlessness of children. Because so many children are born into these dire situations. Grace is born into a family where her father is a serpent-handling minister, a charlatan, yanking his family all over.... But the fervor of that experience is something that is very hard to replace in your later life. Just the intensity of it is very important. But I think rather than living it myself, I wrote that novel and that is why I got so wound up while I was writing it, to experience in some sense that sort of ecstatic religion which Grace finally goes back to. She has to come full circle with it. She has to make her own spiritual journey. She's *going* to go back.

Noble: I don't see it in the book. That is not convincing to me at the very, very end that she is going to renew that kind of relationship with the church.

Smith: Well that was my intention. But I think there is a lot of ambiguity in the way it is actually written, and I was so surprised to find out that there are many readers who didn't think that was what she was going to do in the end. I based that on my own experience of talking with serpent-handling believers, and particularly people who have grown up inside the church like she does, with a father like that.

Noble: You've been interviewed a number of times by a number of people, but there is one quote of yours that just knocks me out and that is, "I admire passion."

Smith: I just admire and have always been drawn to people who are passionate about whatever it is that they do. Last week, I was up in the mountains talking to this old man who makes the most amazing fiddles. And he's been doing it all his life. And when he talks about it his face is on fire. He is old, old, and he carves out the fiddleheads, and he does all kinds of things. He does horses; he does dogs, all kinds of things up there. He can't tell you how he knows what he's even going to do. He just goes at it. This kind of thing fascinates me. I said, "Well how do you know what that's going to be?" And he said, "Well, I don't know. I just carved away everything that wasn't a horse." Men and women, too. I mean I write about very passionate men and very passionate women too. These are the kinds of characters that interest me.

Noble: When I see that quote, and I've seen it more than once, it looks as if you're a sideline person who is admiring the passion of others. And I thought, "That's not right."

Smith: No, I am very much engaged. I am very much engaged in life, family life, and everything. I'm not sitting on the side lines staring into my computer somewhere.

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Noble: Do you literally know the last sentence of a novel before you begin? Or is that just a piece of folklore?

Smith: Well, no, it's the way I write. But it doesn't always work out.

Noble: But you do start out that way?

Smith: Yes, I spend a lot of time doing what I think of as pre-writing. Otherwise, I'm never sure I'm ever going to be able to finish the book so I sort of think the book all the way through. I have a pretty good sense of where I'm going and generally after I write the beginning of it, I will write the last sentence. When I said I didn't want to finish



that book before my mother died, I knew what the last sentence was.

Noble: And you had had it from the start?

Smith: Oh yeah. But I didn't want to get there, but I sort of do, and I always write it on the wall somewhere. I have to kind of look at it. I'm aiming at some point. Several times it has changed. It gives me a sense of maybe I'll be able to finish this book, because this is always in question when you write a novel. You are in the middle; you've expended all this energy, all this time. You should have been doing other stuff, but you've been writing this novel, and you think you are nuts. You just want to be sure that you'll be able to finish.

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Noble: I know that for years you have taught creative writing at NC State and other places as well. This is God's work, of course, but I'm more interested in the workshop experiences with people who aren't college students and who are out in small towns.

Smith: Well, I directed a "Creative Writing with Literacy" project up in Eastern Kentucky where I went up for long residencies for four years. It is people who have just learned to read and write and you get them into writing their own story. Writing about their lives or writing about things that moved them and that they care deeply about. Working with that kind of a student, watching people write something creative for the first time, is like watching them fall in love. It is just fabulous. It just brings back that old thrill. When I went out to do this, I was at a point in my own work when I was really kind of jaded. I was hearing too much about publishers, advances, and agents, and I was, on the other hand, academically hearing too much about deconstruction, English department chicanery, and all this kind of stuff. So it was like remembering why I ever wanted to be a writer in the first place. It was just the thrill of language.

And I like to do all kinds of writing workshops with all kinds of nontraditional students.

Noble: *Where* do you do them?

Smith: Well, I do them a lot with retirement centers...I do them at mental hospitals. I think that writing is so important to us as people, not just to those of us who are trying to create a product to sell. The writing itself is what really matters. So I like to be a midwife. It is just something that I like to do. But also, I have been very fortunate to have teachers who encouraged me, and you sort of like to pass that along.

Noble: You're at the point now where, I guess, there must be a dozen critical articles about your work and a book about your work. I've read these. I've read lots, lots, of the literary criticism about your work. Every time I read something that somebody has written about your work, I try to imagine what *you* think when you look at this. The Aphrodite Myth, Joseph Campbell and Sexual Female Wounding, all kinds of quests. What do you make of this?

Smith: Oh come on. I mean, I think it is just crazy. I think that academic literary criticism, certainly, has become as "creative" as creative writing and this is nuts. I didn't have anything like *that* in mind. Naturally, I'm flattered by the attention, but I'm somewhat mystified.... I think if you worry about how other people interpret your work or what they might say, it'd really drive you nuts. So I just figure you just gotta think, "Okay, I made this book and it's a thing in the world, it exists in the world, and it's got to take its lumps and suffer its interpretation. It's gotta be tough." But I am a teacher too and I do the same thing to other people's writing that they did to mine. I have a certain bias. I know what I think a story means and what these repeated images mean and what they add up to. I'm aware that the writer of that story may not have been aware of that pattern that I've found.

Noble: Years ago when you had two little children, you would hire a babysitter for two or three hours at a stretch and you would go into your back bedroom with a pencil and a

- legal pad and write. And that was your time to write and you were paying for it; literally, the clock was running, and you wrote with a pencil and a legal pad. Do you still?
- Smith: Yes, I do. In fact it almost embarrasses me to say this to people because we have all become so computer mad. My first draft is, not so much a pencil as a pen, but I'm writing still on legal pads. I'm writing still by hand my first drafts because I guess about writing you get superstitious. If it has worked, why mess with it? Also for me, I am so closely, I have to be, so closely tied in and tuned into my characters for them to sort of speak through my actual hands, through my body. It makes it really real for me. I don't want any artificial thing between me and them. I don't want a machine there. I mean later I will type it into a typewriter, onto a computer. I'll go through multiple drafts. I'll do all the stuff. But I just feel like in a certain way that I'm transcribing the voice of the characters often, or the voice of the story, and I don't want anything to get between me and the story. I think I have always been a writer who has been not so much a writerly writer as a speakerly writer.
- Noble: Right.
- Smith: Who is more tuned to the human voice.
- Noble: Right.
- Smith: And I think that is accurately maybe shown in *Oral History*. I think I have a bias there.
- Noble: It is *oral* history.
- Smith: Yeah. But I think in *Fair and Tender Ladies* I was showing what the writing itself meant to Ivy. And really, trying to write a novel about aesthetics. I think I was trying to write there too a novel about an artist. I have always been very interested in artists who operate in the world at large in ways, like a beautician say, who fixes everyone's hair in town, or the florist. I love these figures and Ivy operates as an artist in her own life. She is turning her life into a kind of art, which is her letters. And even though it is not published, is it not art?