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A PHOTO ESSAY

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Literary Heritage





Smith tells students that being from a small town isn't such a disadvantage to writing if you can learn to recognize everyday situations as inspiration.

"We were lucky that many of our professors were writers also and would bring their work in for us to look over and get ideas. It made it seem that being a writer was something regular people might do."

In the genes

Smith was born into a family of storytellers, surrounded by them while growing up in Grundy, Virginia. "My mother could go to the drug store and come home with a story about the people she met there," says Smith. Her father came from a long line of old-time mountaineers with a gift for crafting tales.

The unsuspecting folks of the small mountain town probably had no idea they were under the watchful eyes of the young Smith, who spent a considerable amount of time people-watching. With her own little typewriter for capturing their stories, she would sit up in the office of her father's store and observe the happenings below her.

"I would see big kisses, fights, and once saw a woman steal a radio by hiding it under her coat," she says. When Smith's father gave her a job taking care of the store's dolls, Smith created tales for each one. This early training taught her much about the importance of place in a story.

"I have always wanted to write," says Smith. Her father gave her the perfect place, a small house out back by the river. There she could spin her tales, like her first novel, which included her two favorite people at the time, Adlai Stevenson and Jane Russell. "They fell in love and went West together in a covered wagon," she explains. Even at age 8, Smith had characters doing the opposite of what society expected from them.

She enrolled at Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia. "I went because my cousin Peggy Smith went there. I had no idea I would be walking into heaven." That heaven was the school's creative writing program, which in 1963 was one of the few in the nation. "We had a very open atmosphere and were all trying to learn how to do this art of writing. Nobody was out to crush anybody else. We felt safe with each other, and it didn't matter if you failed," she explains.

Lee's classmates included Annie Dillard and Dr. Lucinda MacKethan, an English professor at North Carolina State University. "We were lucky that many of our professors were writers also and would bring their work in for us to look over and get ideas. It made it seem that being a writer was something regular people might do," she explains. Smith's first published novel was her senior thesis, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, which won her an award from the Readers Digest College Association.

Teacher within

After graduating, Smith married poet James Seay and worked throughout the South at several newspapers and schools. Soon after arriving in Chapel Hill in 1974, she began teaching English at Carolina

“I have been writing so long, it is how I think things through and process them. If I wasn’t being published, I would still be writing.”

Friends School in Durham. Smith says it was the perfect job while raising her two sons, Josh and Page.

During this time, Smith was trying to get her latest novel, *Black Mountain Breakdown*, published. “My first novels had been well received but had not made enough money for the publishers, so it was hard to get signed on somewhere else.” Smith went eight years without being published, until Putnam released the book in 1981.

After leaving Carolina Friends, Smith took a part-time teaching job at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she met Jill McCorkle in her first class. McCorkle recalls that first day: “We were all sitting around the table talking and laughing when one of the students asked how long should we wait for the professor to show up, when all of a sudden a cute woman in blue jeans with a scarf tied on her head said, ‘I’m the teacher.’”

Smith remembers that first class, too. “I had no idea what I had said to the students on the first day, so the next day I told them I may be repeating myself,” she says with a laugh.

McCorkle says Smith taught her that being from a small town wasn’t such a disadvantage in writing. “She told me all I had to do was to know and recognize everyday situations. She gave me an enormous amount of confidence and encouragement,” McCorkle says. “She made you feel safe even when you were feeling shy about what you had written that week. She was broad minded and full of respect.”

Smith also taught writing classes at Duke University through its continuing education program. Recently divorced, she met her future husband, editorialist Hal Crowther, while both of them were teaching there.

Literary citizen

In 1981, her Hollins classmate, MacKethan, invited Smith to apply for a job teaching creative writing at NCSU. “I was a nervous wreck,” Smith says. “I had to make a presentation to the faculty, and I didn’t have any advanced degrees.” She needn’t have worried.

Smith is very fond of her 19 years teaching at NCSU. “I can honestly say I enjoyed my students at State the most,” she says. “I had the widest range of students in my classes — pig farmers, ministers, moms, and university students. Every class was full of such diversity. They all brought a

wealth of life with them. I loved the chance to talk about what really matters with a group of people who were passionately engaged in trying to write.”

Taking the time to read their work very carefully, she helped them fulfill their own visions. MacKethan says NCSU was equally lucky to have Smith. “She was a huge part of setting our creative writing program in motion.”

Pam Duncan, author of three novels, was one of those fortunate students. Duncan received her master’s degree from NCSU, and Smith advised her on her thesis, which turned out to be her first

Raising the Bar

I was one of the lucky ones who took classes from Lee Smith at North Carolina State University. In those classes at Tompkins Hall, I and hundreds of others learned from someone who was and is always willing to give a little extra to a student of writing.

The lessons I learned still guide me 20 years later. “When you start writing, just write,” she would tell us. “Don’t stop if you think you have misspelled a word; you may lose your train of thought. You can check that later.” And my favorite: “Don’t look at the blank sheet of paper too long. Just start writing something down, and it doesn’t matter if it’s three pages later, it will start to flow.”

The classes required a lot of work. Lee raised the bar for every student and made sure they reached their potential each week. There would be 15 students in a class on average, and by semester’s end we knew each other very well. Students would read their selections for the night, and then we would critique each other. But the most anticipated moment was when Lee commented. She was honest, but she was always positive. You knew she had carefully read what you had written. And, like a great sports coach, she somehow got out of you that little extra you never knew you had.

During my last class with Lee, she suggested I try writing creative non-fiction. “You love history so much; you love interviewing people,” she said in her office. I took her advice and had two creative nonfiction books published and have been fortunate enough to write for *Our State*.

It doesn’t matter that the classes with her were two decades ago: When I need advice, her wisdom is there for me, still telling me it’s all right to be a little scared to look at that blank sheet of paper — but not for too long.

— Diane Silcox-Jarrett

published book, *Moon Women*. "I am a card-carrying member of the Lee Smith fan club," Duncan says. "Without her, I wouldn't be where I am now. She not only taught us how to write but how to be persistent when it came to getting a book published."

Duncan admits some rejection letters were hard to take. "But Lee taught me to be thick skinned and that I had only to find that one person. She taught me that being a writer ain't for sissies."

Even though she retired from NCSU in 2000, Smith continues to give workshops throughout the country. She recently participated in "Together We Read" in western North Carolina. This program links mountain region people from all walks of life in reading the same book. They come together at 100 sites through a 21-county region to discuss each one. Smith's *On Agate Hill* was the last book chosen. "They filmed me in an Ashe County middle school workshop so they could show it in schools throughout the other counties. This is a fantastic chance to engage readers on every level," she says.

Her editor at Algonquin Books, Shannon Ravenel, says Smith loves to give back. "Lee is a first-rank literary citizen; she is so supportive of new writers."

Ravenel and Smith crossed paths when Smith sent her first book to Houghton Mifflin for publication. Ravenel happened to be the editor to see it. "She rejected it but sent me two typed, singled-spaced pages on what to change. And I did it all," Smith says, laughing. "Now, 40 years later, she's my editor; that's a million-to-one chance."

The power of writing

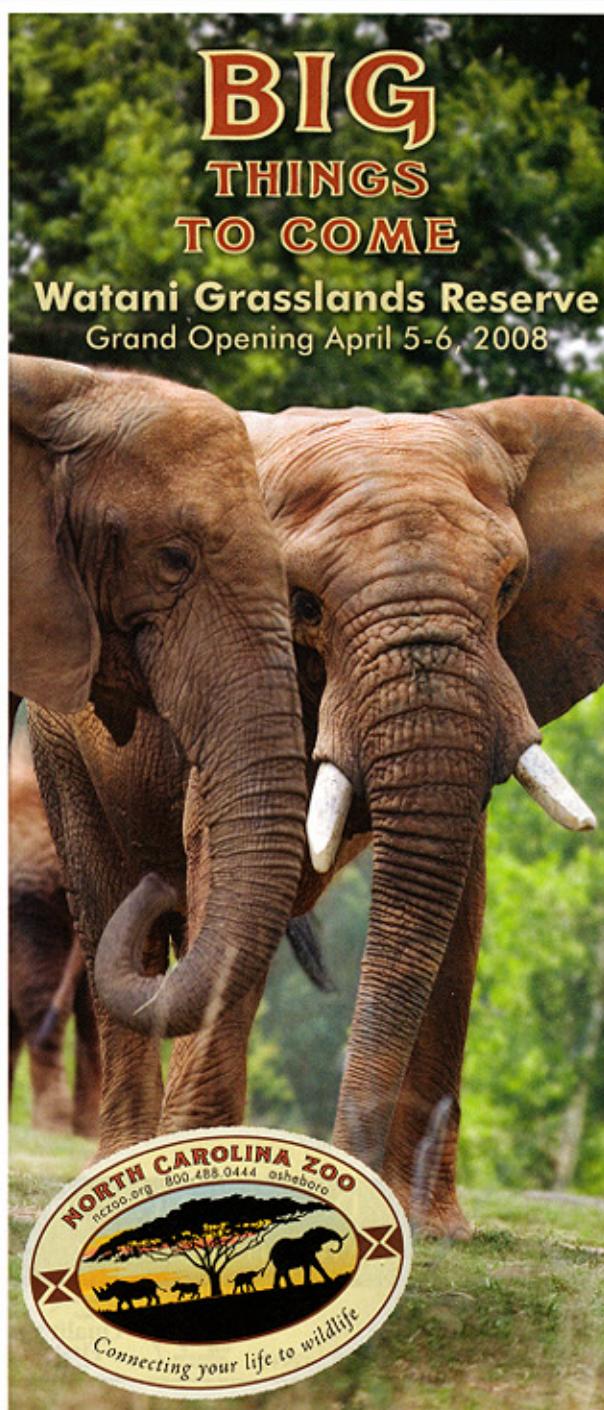
Smith is not one to talk much about herself or her many awards. She's more apt to tell colorful stories about an outing with Hal or about Hillsborough where she lives or about her three grandchildren, whose pictures are displayed; the awards are not.

Family is big to Smith. When her son, Josh, died in 2003, her heart

broke. She found some solace in writing her latest novel, *On Agate Hill*. At the end of it, she writes, "But writing is also a source of nourishment and strength. It cannot bring our loved ones back, but it can sometimes fix them in our fleeting memories as they were in life, and it can always help us make it through the night." Writing is like breathing to Smith. "I have been writing so long, it is

how I think things through and process them. If I wasn't being published, I would still be writing," she says.

The characters her readers have come to love and laugh with, Smith only reluctantly leaves behind. "Once I work on a story for so long, it is hard to give up the characters. When I box the manuscript up to send to the publisher, I am sad and have a sense of loss. I feel like they



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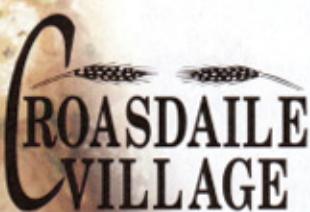
“Once I work on a story for so long, it is hard to give up the characters. When I box the manuscript up to send to the publisher, I am sad and have a sense of loss. ... That is why I can never bring them back and write about them again.”

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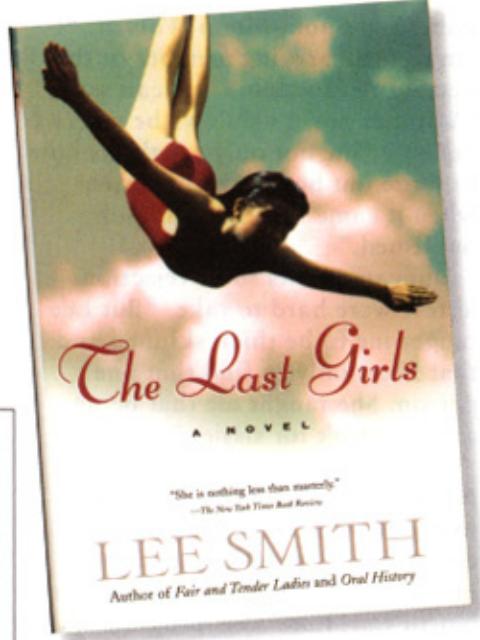
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have really died. That is why I can never bring them back and write about them again.”

Although characters may not reappear, Smith never stops creating, and her pen flows — longhand. “I always write my first draft longhand,” she says. She writes from her second-story home office looking out over Hillsborough or, just like when she was a little girl, from a little house next to her home.

She possesses the same energy and enthusiasm for writing as that young girl who observed people in her father’s store, but says it’s contact with people that centers her. “I’m not one of those writers who holes up in their room. I have always wanted to be out in the middle of it,” she says.

That’s evident at book signings, as Smith engages every person who comes by her table, each anticipating they will be greeted with that wonderful smile and the sparkle from her blue eyes. It’s that same spark she has shared with hundreds of students and thousands of readers — the spark that can light a room or weave a magical tale. 

Diane Silcox-Jarrett writes from her home in Raleigh.