

BOOK CLUB To Go!

A Thousand Acres

By Jane Smiley

Introduction

The vast and beautiful landscape of a thousand-acre farm is where Jane Smiley begins her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. Scanning the countryside through a fish eye lens, the novel brings into focus a small barbecue party where a decision has been made that will break down the frail framework that has held together a seemingly idyllic and prosperous third-generation farm family. The focus narrows as Jane Smiley delves into these complex, trapped characters blindly leading themselves into unchangeable situations. Reminiscent of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the story revolves around three daughters and their father, Larry, who sees them as one entity with no personality, their only reason for existence being to serve him. Ginny, the protagonist, her indecision swinging like a pendulum, selflessly wants to please everyone. Rose, the witty, sarcastic middle sister, is at first the only person with whom Ginny can identify. The confident Caroline left the farm to become a lawyer; now she drifts through Ginny's and Rose's lives like an outsider. Just when it seems that the reader knows everything about these complex characters, Jane Smiley sneaks up from behind and exposes another layer of their lives. Vivid and unsettling, **A Thousand Acres** takes us to the edge of unbelievable desperation and makes us question whether anyone's life is what it seems.

(Five Hundred Great Books by Women)

An ambitious reimagining of Shakespeare's **King Lear** cast upon a typical American community in the late twentieth century, **A Thousand Acres** takes on themes of truth, justice, love, and pride, and reveals the beautiful yet treacherous topography of humanity.

(Amazon)

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About the Author

“Jane Smiley turned fifty just in time for the new millennium. She lives in California with her three children, three dogs, and her sixteen (and counting) horses. Born in Los Angeles, California, Jane moved to the suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri, as an infant, and lived there through grammar school and high school (The John Burroughs School). After getting her BA at Vassar College in 1971, she traveled in Europe for a year, working on an archeological dig and sightseeing, then returned for graduate school at the University of Iowa.

MFA and PhD in hand, she went to work in 1982 at Iowa State University, in Ames, where she taught until 1996. She has been married three times – to John Whiston (1970-1975), William Silag (1978-1986), and Stephen M. Mortensen (1987-1997). She has two daughters, Phoebe Silage (1978), Lucy Silag (1982) and one son, AJ Mortensen (1992). Jane is the author of ten works of fiction, including *The Age of Grief*, *The Greenlanders*, *Ordinary Love and Good Will*, *A Thousand Acres*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 and *Moo*, as well as many essays for such magazines as *Vogue*, *The New Yorker*, *Practical Horseman*, *Harper's*, *the New York Times Magazine* and the *New York Times* travel section, *Victoria*, *Mirabella*, *Allure*, *The Nation* and others. She has written on politics, farming, horse training, child-rearing, literature, impulse buying, getting dressed, Barbie, marriage, and many other topics. She is also the author, from Crown, of a book on craftspeople living in the Catskills. Her novel *Horse Heaven* was published in April 2000.”

(<http://www.randomhouse.com/features/smiley/author.html>)

Reviews

"This important new novel by the author of *Ordinary Love and Good Will* (LJ 9/15/89) and *The Greenlanders* (LJ 4/15/88) is, first of all, a farm novel. Smiley lovingly creates an idyllic world of family farm life in Iowa in 1979: the neat yard, freshly painted house, clean clothes on the line, and fertile, well-tended fields. The owner of these well-managed acres is Larry Cook, who abruptly decides to turn the farm over to his two eldest daughters and their husbands. Ginny and Ty are hard-working farmers who try to placate her ornery father, while sister Rose and hard-drinking Pete try to stand up to him. Dark secrets surface after the property transfer, and the family's careful world unravels with a grim inevitability reminiscent of Smiley's splendid novella *Good Will*. Not to be missed." *—Library Journal*

"Lear in Iowa. In a scalding, 20th-century version of Shakespeare's tragedy, Smiley--clawing open the "ingratitude" of a monarch's elder daughters to reveal a rage that could out-tempest Lear's--once again examines the buried secret hurts within families and the deadly results when damaged egos are unleashed: "The one thing...maybe no family could tolerate was things coming out into the open." Living under the iron order of that tyrannical, successful farmer Larry Cook, owner of 640 Iowa acres, are: daughter Rose, 34-year-old recovering cancer patient, mother of two and wife of ex-musician Pete, the perennial outsider, object of Larry's contempt; and childless Ginny, married to Tyler, an easygoing man who can betray with silence. Youngest daughter Caroline, whom motherless Rose and Ginny had raised and unfettered from Daddy, is a lawyer in Des Moines. It's at a well-liquored neighborhood social that Daddy announces he's giving up his farm to his three daughters. "I don't know," says cool lawyer Caroline, and Daddy slams off in a fury. As Rose and Ginny and their pleased husbands prepare for a release from Daddy's overlordship, something else is released when Rose--scenting out weakness in the terrible old man--hungers for revenge at last. Nothing but Daddy's repentance will do for deeds in the past so foul that Ginny has blotted out the memory and Rose has kept her silence. Circling around Rose's sizzling path toward impossible satisfaction, with Ginny in tow, are their husbands--one blunted, one death-bound--and a self-exiled native son who will drive a wedge between the two sisters, mingling a hate and lust/love that brings one to murder. As for Daddy's angel Caroline--come back to flight for Daddy (senile? maybe), never battered by home maelstroms--he's been simply a father "no more, no less." With the Bard's peak moments--the storm, a blinding, etc.--a potent tragedy immaculate in characters, stately pace, and lowering ambiance." *—Kirkus Reviews*

Further Reading

King Lear by William Shakespeare

A Summons to Memphis by Peter Hillsman Taylor

The Stone Diaries by Carol Shields