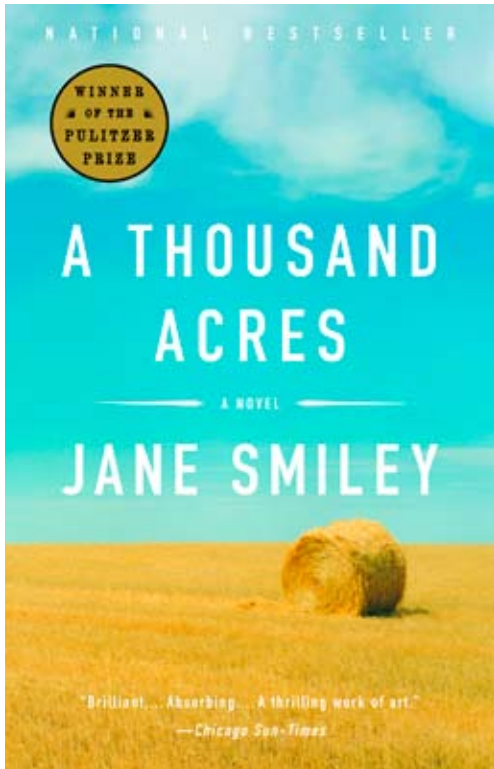


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Reader's Guide 2009:

A Thousand Acres by Jane Smiley

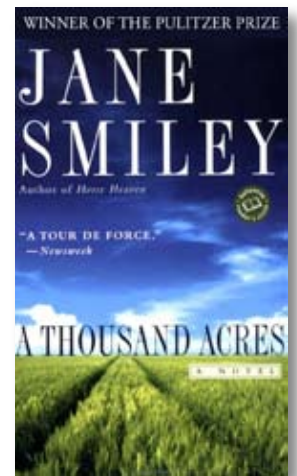
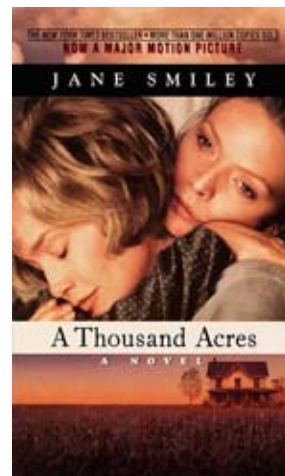
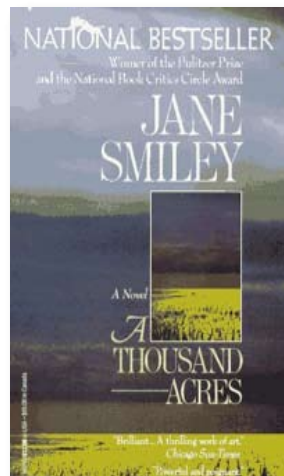
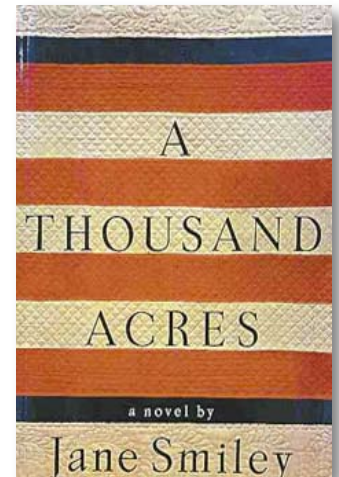
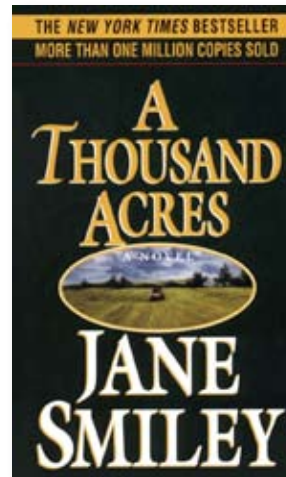
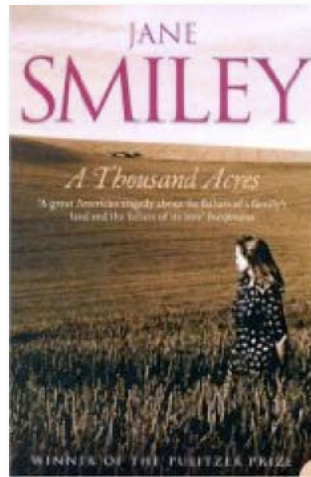
Guide prepared by Kathleen Butterly Nigro, Ph.D.



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

*“Most issues on a farm return to the issue
of keeping up appearances.”*

[26; 199]



**What expectations would you have of the book for each of the covers printed here?
Which aspects of the story are emphasized in each?**

The epigraph of the novel by Meridel Le Sueur begins with this quotation: “The body repeats the landscape. They are the source of each other and create each other. We were marked by the seasonal body of earth, by the terrible migrations of people, by the swift turn of a century, verging on change never before experienced on this greening planet.”

In what ways do the lives of the characters reflect the land on which they live (consider Ginny and Rose, Harold and Jess Clark for example)?

How could this novel be read as an ecofeminist story; that is, that our oppression and abuse of the land can be seen reflected in the way men treat women?

The novel begins and ends with Ginny's reflections about the intersection of County 686 and Cabot Street Road. However, in Chapter 1, "Our farm and our lives seemed secure and good"; In the Epilogue, "No lives are lived any more within the horizon of your gaze."

Why did the author choose Ginny as the narrator of the story?

Would you characterize Ginny's circular journey a positive or a negative one?

In what ways would you consider her odyssey a passage towards self-awareness?

Although the novel ends with no lives lived visibly within the reader's perspective, there are of course the lives that were lived there and the effects of those lives on those that still continue, such as the severed relationship between Ginny and Caroline or Ginny with Pammy and Linda.

What effects do our early relationships have on our later ones, even when we do look at them honestly, as Rose tried to do? In other words, was Rose any less affected by their father than Ginny, whose realization took many more years?

What are the roles of time and memory in our definitive view of reality?

Ginny says, "The view along the Scenic ... taught me a lesson about what is below the level of the visible" [2; 9]. She considers how even the familiar changes in subtle ways.

Appearance is a main focus of the novel. How does the community operate with its assumptions about appearance (Consider Larry Cook's standing in the community, its opinion about what makes a good farmer, and the marriages, for example)?

What do we learn about the pervasiveness of reality that prevails, despite the "visible" appearance, despite the fact that Ginny says, "There were no clues"? Jess Clark calls her "oblivious" [20; 121]. Is this the word you would use to describe Ginny, or can you suggest another? (You might want to consider the conversation between Rose and Ginny when everything is "crystal clear" to Ginny but she is unable to choose one thought about her father over another [20; 152-153].

Consider the tile that transforms the Cook land from "an ocean of grass" [3; 16] into very valuable property. Ultimately, can nature be eternally controlled?

Ginny's "private project" to have a baby showed her "a whole secret world, a way to have two lives, to be two selves" [5; 26]. How is this self-image emblematic of the lives of other characters?

After Mr. Cartier advises the Smiths and the Lewises, "*If you look good, they won't be able to touch you,*" Ginny becomes obsessed with the regularity of ritual: "I was so remarkably comfortable with the discipline of making a good appearance!" [36; 284-285]. Their ability to look good (for females) and have a successful harvest (for males) turned the lawsuit in the daughters' favor. However, there was more lost than the title to the farm for, as Ginny observes, "there could be no reconciliation now" [40; 326]. What was the cost of this lawsuit to each member of the family and perhaps even to the community of Zebulon County?

After Pete's death, Ginny notices "the marvelous engine of appearances had started up" [37; 293]. Some things (such as Pete's propensity to drink) were acceptable to discuss; others, (such as Pete's abuse of Rose) could only be addressed obliquely. Is this behavior any different from the way everyone else acts? Does seeing its effects on a community other than your own give you any insight into the real cost of "keeping up appearances"? (Recall that in the previous chapter, Jean Cartier had told the Smiths and the Lewises that "appearances are everything" [36; 284]).

The "catechism" Ginny recounts in Chapter 8 implies traditional and inviolable rules about how farmers are supposed to conduct themselves. The "signs of a good farm: Clean fields, neatly painted buildings, breakfast at six, no debts, no standing water" all reinforce not only the theme of appearance but also imply a biblical justification for behavior.

When Ginny went to first grade, she believed that her father defined both categories of father and farmer: "To really believe that others even existed in either category was to break the First Commandment" [4; 19]. Discuss how Ginny's view of her father compares and contrasts with your own. Why did Ginny take so long to revise her view?

What other Commandments were broken in the novel and why are those particularly significant?

Although Larry Cook liked the Ericsons, he did not approve of their farming methods. Ginny's mother felt differently about them because of Elizabeth Ericson's "welcoming manner" [8; 46]. Ginny is surprised to realize that "our proximity to the Ericsons shaped all of my opinions and expectations" [8; 43]. Discuss the significance of such a broad statement made when Ginny "looks back" at her childhood. How was her deep love for Ruthie Ericson shaped by their unconventional behavior [8; 47]?

Thomas Jefferson's dream for America was one of agrarian democracy; that is, a nation of farmers.

How did the Davis and Cook ancestors fulfill that dream?

How were the Ericsons a threat to Larry Cook's vision of the "American promise" [8; 46]?

Why was the American landscape something that, from the beginning, had to be subdued in order to be productive [8; 46, for example]?

Did the land ever "rebel" against some of the methods and practices? (You might want to consider Rose's cancer, Ginny's infertility, Harold's blindness or, in the Epilogue, the five-thousand-sow-capacity buildings, the vertical food conglomerates, and the toxic, pale soil Ginny sees as she drives through the country.)

What does Jess Clark's suggestion of organic farming mean in the novel?

“The fact is that the same sequence of days can arrange themselves into a number of different stories” [21; 155].

Ginny had told Ty that the transfer was a “legal fiction. He (Daddy) is this place” [14; 104].

Why does everyone interpret the transfer in different way? Why did Larry Cook initiate the transfer in the first place?

Why is the storm such a significant event? (Jess Clark tells Ginny, *“He said you whores had sent him out into the storm and that he wished he’d had sons.”* When she denies it, Jess comforts her: *“I knew there was more to it than meets the eye”* [25; 195]. And yet, sympathies lie with Larry Cook. Why?)

Where do Ty’s sympathies lie, and why? How does his relationship with his father-in-law differ from the way Pete and Larry communicate?

Why did each of the three daughters choose the husband she did? (Consider that Pete is “irritating” to Larry and keeps him young, according to Ty [4; 25]; Rose says she married Pete because she wanted “someone exciting enough to erase Daddy” [38; 298]. Pete, however, was abusive to Rose, pushing her and breaking her arm [5; 31 and 19; 141]. Ginny acknowledges Ty’s positive qualities as an honest person and “superior farmer but says she married him not only because she was a freak but most of all because “he attracted Daddy” [33; 262]. They “disagree without fighting ... better than sex” [14; 104]. Caroline and her husband Frank were “so out of place in the Zebulon County Courthouse” that the image drove any notion of reconciliation from Ginny’s mind [40; 317]).

Why does Jess Clark become the lover of both Cook sisters? In Chapter 32 [251], Ginny wonders, “Wouldn’t it be a relief to have everything out in the open for once?” Do you agree with her? Are some things better left unsaid?

How do Rose and Ginny differ in the way they ultimately view Jess Clark? (Consider that even in the Epilogue, Ginny says that “Jess left me the eyes” to see the nutrient-depleted soil and “some anger” at the children she imagine could have been hers.)

When Ty finds the nightgown that Ginny had hidden in the barn, he says, *“Lots of secrets around here.”* Ginny replies, *“People keep secrets when other people don’t want to hear the truth”* [33; 258]. Discuss the interplay of truth and lies in the novel and whether there is an objective story.

Discuss the roles and perspectives of the minor characters such as Marv Carson (*“Oh, Ginny, goodness me, everything is toxic. That’s the point. You can’t avoid toxins. Thinking you can is just another symptom of the toxic overload stage”* [5; 29]) or Mary Livingstone (*“It’s okay, Mary. I was just wondering what facts there were that I haven’t faced”* [13; 93]).

According to Ginny, their mother “had a history ... and for us this history was to be found in her closet” [29; 224]. What did the girls discover and learn there, playing with these “holy relics”?

When she leaves for Minnesota, Ginny forgets she is “still alive,” but she relishes the routine and the anonymity [42; 336]. Why do you think her new “afterlife” is so fulfilling for her, when she takes such pains to keep it so impersonal?

In their final encounter, Ginny says, *“I should have told Caroline the truth”* [45; 364]. What do you think she means by this statement, and what would be gained if she were to do so?

“... that’s how the tournament started, the Million Dollar World Series of Monopoly ...” [12; 76].

Why does the Monopoly game become something “none of us could keep away from” [12; 76]? What does it symbolize, and what opportunities does it present? (Consider, for example, Ginny’s new opinion of Pete, or the competitiveness that develops.)

When Rose dumps the board in Pete’s lap, Jess tries to defray his anger: *“Unrestrained capitalism always ends in war,”* he quotes. Discuss the relevance of this quote to the novel as a whole [19; 141].

When Rose, Ginny, and Jess are discussing what motivated Harold’s outburst at the church picnic and the father’s true feelings toward his son, Rose takes his behavior as evidence: *“Doesn’t that prove that it’s all a game with him?”* [30; 231]. Are Larry Cook and Harold Clark similar in the way they farm and in the way they communicate with their children?

Later on in the same scene, Rose says to Jess and Ginny, *“You both seem to think that here’s some game going on here, that we can choose to play or not... Maybe you can. But this is life and death for me”* [30; 238]. What does Rose mean by this comment?

Rose relates this observation to her prior comment that Jess believed the Vietnam War to be just like his life story in which he was subjected to “every passing principle and whim and desire” (see also 8; 55, about how Jess’s parents were “keeping up appearances” by cutting off any communication with him.) How do the relationships in the novel take on the image of an undeclared but still harmful armed conflict? Why is it significant that Jess fled to Canada in what was called “draft-dodging” at the time (Jess calls them “draft refusers”)?

Later, at the quarry, Ginny thinks, *“Every life I knew of in Zebulon County was marked by conflict and loss”* [32; 248].

She considers how, up until this point, loss always strengthened their conviction that the pain “was worth it.” Do you think Ginny felt this way at the end of the novel?

When games are over, there is always a winner and a loser. How does the Cook farm resemble a thousand-acre game board? Is passing the Sears Chelsea (where Larry lived) analogous to passing “Go”?

Ginny says that her “inheritance” includes regret, solitude, and Pam and Linda [Epilogue; 368-369]. She also cherishes above all else the “gleaming obsidian shard” against “the very darkness” that she imagines her father felt [371]. Would you consider this a victory or a defeat for her?

“... and the hallmark of our failure was the way we ate with our heads down, hungrily, quickly, because there was nothing else to do at the table” [14; 102].

This realization comes to Ginny “the day when everything I was worried about came to pass,” the same day she realizes that the “mealtime sociability” is a result of Jess Clark [14; 100-102]. Discuss the role of food in the novel, including the fact that Ginny and Rose prepare many of their father’s meals without any variation [8; 47], the types of food that are served at social gatherings, and how Jess Clark threatens the appetites, hunger, and satisfaction of the Cook and Clark families.

Why did Ginny make the poisoned sausage she hoped Rose would eat, “calm now, interested to see what would happen” [39; 314]? How has she prepared you to think her capable of such an act?

Literary Comparisons

King Lear

by William Shakespeare

Many scholars (including the author herself) have compared *A Thousand Acres* to Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear* in their comparable themes of love, darkness, and greed; their analogous characters (in Shakespeare, the three daughters were Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia); and in the implication of incest. Discuss the similarities that follow:

Referring to the rejection of his youngest daughter Cordelia (who, like Caroline, did not show the proper deference when asked to describe her love for her father, Lear) Regan says, "*'Tis the infirmity of his age, yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself*" [I, 1]. In other words, though Lear's reaction might be attributed to age, it is nevertheless in keeping with his character to lack insight and introspection.

Consider the following observations by the daughters about their father in light of Regan's observations about Lear:

Ginny

"My father had a way of making unanswerable remarks" [10; 66].

"(To Pammy and Linda) Your mom's just exaggerating. Grandpa has been doing some things that we don't understand" [12; 83].

Rose

"He's dangerous! He's impulsive and angry, and he doesn't give people the same benefit of the doubt that they give him!" [20; 150].

"Where's the fun in being understood? Laurence Cook, the great I AM ... I understand him perfectly. You're making it too complicated. It's as simple as a child's book. I want. I take. I do" [27; 211-212].

Caroline

"Two months ago, Daddy was happily farming his own land. Now he's lost everything he had, wandering around, trying to figure out something to do with himself" [16; 117].

"You have a thing against Daddy! It's just greed or something" [45; 363].

Discuss the similarities between the two brothers Edmund (bastard son to the Duke of Gloucester) and Edgar (legitimate son to Gloucester), to Jess and Loren Clark. Harold Clark has been compared to the Duke of Gloucester, who remained loyal to the king.

Edmund

"... so that it follows I am rough and lecherous" [I, 2].

Edmund

*"A credulous father! and a brother noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty
My practices ride easy!"* [1, 2].

Recall that Ginny observed Loren's *"pleasant disposition [that] gave him a goofy quality"*: Jess *"was like this alternative edition of Loren"* [2; 9].

At the church supper, Harold fights with Jess: *"I got your number, too, you yellow son of a bitch. You got your eye on my place, and you been cozying up to me for a month now, thinking I'm going to hand it over"* [28; 219].

Recall that Harold told Ginny that she and Rose "owe" their dad: *"If you'd have been sons, you'd understand that"* [26; 204].

In the play, Goneril is attracted to Edmund, the illegitimate brother, considering her husband, the Duke of Albany, *"milk-livered."* Regan is also attracted to Edmund and as a result is poisoned by Goneril. Discuss the role of jealousy in the parallel relationships in the novel.

Lear curses his daughter Goneril, that she may never bear a child:

*"Hear, Nature, hear ... if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility;
Dry up in her the organs of increase;
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her!"* [1, 4].

Recall Larry Cook's rant against Ginny: *"You barren whore! ... But you're not really a woman, are you? I don't know what you are, just a bitch, is all, a dried-up whore bitch"* [23; 181].

In Grace Caroline Bridge's 1994 poem, "Lisa's Ritual, Age 10," the poet describes the habitual practices the child uses to erase the feeling and memory of her father's abuse of her:

... she falls inside
slides down like
dust like kitchen dirt
slips off
the dustpan into
no place
a place where
nothing happens,
nothing ever happens.

Compare Lisa's experience to Ginny's, who calls her own "strategy" of dealing with her rape by her father *"desperate limp inertia"* [35; 280]. You might also want to consider Ginny's therapeutic use of cleaning.

The Duke of Gloucester evaluates the temper of the Duke of Cornwall, husband to Regan:

*“Tis the Duke’s pleasure
Whose disposition, all the world well knows,
Will not be rubb’d nor stopp’d”* [II, 2].

Recall Ginny’s memories of Pete’s anger, perhaps a result of disappointment: *“His anger would be quiet, but corrosive, later erupting at odd times toward Ty or Rose, even at me or his daughters, wildly, viciously eloquent, insults and threats, mounting crazily until you couldn’t believe your ears.”* [5; 31].

After Pete’s death, Rose remembers the effect of Pete’s anger on their family: *“It’s never been good. It was exciting once in a while, because Pete was so unpredictable, but— ... We had a new plan every month, but Pete always screwed them up, with his temper ...”* [38; 299].

In the play, Gloucester is blinded by Cornwall. Recall that Rose tells Ginny that Pete emptied the water tank on Harold’s fertilizer tank [38; 301].

“The Bear,” Go Down, Moses

by William Faulkner

In section 4 of “The Bear,” Faulkner talks about the land that Carothers McCaslin *“had bought with white man’s money from the wild men whose grandfathers without guns hunted it, and tamed and ordered it for the reason that the human beings he held in bondage and in the power of life and death had removed the forest from it ...”*

However, the story also explores the notion that land cannot really be owned *“because on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realised, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his forever, father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing.”*

Discuss the ideas suggested by Faulkner that the possession of land is a human presumption that leads to greed and a false sense of power.

Draw a parallel between the “human beings held in bondage” (slaves) and the power Larry Cook wielded against his family.

Compare these ideas with the “American promise” of *Manifest Destiny*.

Consider the ethnocentric (culturally limited) perspective in Robert Frost’s poem, “The Gift Outright,” when he writes: *“The land was ours before we were the land’s,/She was our land more than a hundred years/Before we were her people ... we were England’s, still colonials,/Possessing what we still were unpossessed by ...”*

In what ways does the poem justify the taking and acquiring of land?

How did Ginny explain and justify the Cooks’ acquisition of the thousand-acre farm?: *“The Depression, for our family, was a time of careful consolidation of holdings through hard work, good luck, smart farming. Of course, that wasn’t how everyone in Zebulon County saw it, but my father would say, ‘Envy likes to talk’”* [4; 23].

Chapter 18 begins with a description of American farms and how they developed from “generations of water plants, birds, animals, insects ...,” resulting in thick, rich soil, “more alive with a past and future abundance of life than any soil anywhere” [131-132].

How does this Edenic view of the land clash with the toxic practices of modern-day farming?

What value or drawbacks might there be in Jess Clark’s vision of organically farmed land?

Ginny observes, “*There was no way to tell by looking that the land beneath my childish feet wasn’t the primeval mold I read about in school, but it was new, created by magic lines of tile my father would talk about with pleasure and reverence. ... However much these acres looked like a gift of nature, or of God, they were not*” [3; 15].

Are the tiles a blessing or a curse, when you consider the final result, or are they (as Ginny says in another context), “*Another lesson in that lifelong course of study about the tricks of appearance*”? [9; 56].

What should be the role of technology in land development (when we build houses, for example) and agriculture (as in food production)?

In Sylvia Plath’s scathing poem, “Daddy,” she compares her father to a Nazi and herself to a Jew exiled to a concentration camp. Compare the following section of Plath’s poem to Ginny’s observation below. Note especially the repetition and perceived emphasis of the personal pronoun.

*“I never could talk to you, / The tongue stuck in my jaw.
It stuck in a barb wire snare. / Ich [I], ich, ich, ich, / I could hardly speak”*

He shouts, “*I—I—I—*” roaring and glorying in his self-definition ... and then he impresses us by blows with the weight of his “I” and the feathery nonexistence of ourselves, our questions, our doubts, our differences of opinion. That was Daddy [39; 306].

Consider the use of the diminutive “Daddy” (rather than “Dad”) by the adult children in both works.

Discuss the relevance of the following critical observations of *A Thousand Acres*:

Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*, can be read as her version of the American myth of success. ... Smiley recognizes the tragic side of men's capitalistic and materialistic pursuits and suggests that women examine their positions in capitalist America and, as options for success, develop their own voices to fight exploitation and take control of their own lives.

Kyoko Amano, "Alger's Shadows in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*." **Critique** (Fall 2005).

Paradoxically, although the reader sympathizes with Ginny and Rose, the community they live in takes their father's side and regards them almost exactly as a reader of "King Lear" sees Goneril and Regan ... what she (Smiley) has written can even be seen as a feminist's version of the Lear story.

The novel is also deeply concerned with human society's relation to nature, just as Shakespeare was in questioning whether Lear was doing the natural thing by deeding his kingdom to his daughters, or whether Gloucester's bastard son, Edmund, was nonetheless more a natural than unnatural son. In *A Thousand Acres*, much of the evil that is set loose is a result of humans attempting to exert control over nature.

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "On an Iowa Farm, a Tragedy with Echoes of Lear." **The New York Times** (31 Oct 1991).

Given that what the courtesy conceals, what the manners conceal, is incest and physical brutality, one might seem justified in arguing that *A Thousand Acres* is an extended condemnation of such conventions and the behaviours they require. But it would be more accurate to say that the novel is an extended examination of such conventions and behaviours, of what they enable both positively and negatively in social life.

Sharon O'dair, "Horror or Realism? Filming 'Toxic Discourse' in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*." **Textual Practice** (Summer 2005).

... the novel also gained some notoriety in 1994 when it was banned in a high school in Lynden, Washington (population 5700), where a teacher assigned it as a companion text to *King Lear* in an Advanced Placement English class. Parents whose children were not in the class objected that the novel contained obscene language and explicit representations of adultery. ... However, I have discovered no account of the Lynden controversy in the several I've read which complained of the representations of sexual abuse which forms the central revelation of the novel and constitutes its most significant elaboration of and gloss on its source. Smiley herself expressed keen disappointment—not, it must be said, upon finding that her novel had been banned, but rather upon learning the reason ... "You can imagine my disappointment, then, when I discovered that the grounds for the banning was the same old, same old use of the 'f' word and heterosex between consenting adults"

Marina Leslie, "Incest, Incorporation, and King Lear in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*." **College English** (Jan 1998).

“Unless Hollywood chooses to ignore the author’s intent, *A Thousand Acres* will portray farming as “a patriarchal power structure that subjugates women and exploits nature,” wrote Sharon Dimond in a letter to the editor of *The Rochelle News-Leader*. She said she wanted to warn her neighbors that this wouldn’t be “another one of Jessica Lange’s Farm Aid type of pictures.”

Gioia Diliberto, “King Lear’s World, Reborn on a Farm in the Heartland.” *The New York Times* (8 Dec 1996).

A Thousand Acres excavates the gendered “amnesias” created by the agrarian imagined communities inscribed across American landscapes. The novel exposes the intertwined discourses of nation building and gender construction that locate paternal ownership at the origin and center of the nation while covering over alternative histories.

Mary Paniccia Carden, “Remembering/Engendering the Heartland: Sexed Language, Embodied Space, and America’s Foundational Fictions in Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*.” *Frontiers* (1997).

Domination by an oppressor is maintained by keeping the center of power invisible to the oppressed, thereby leaving nothing for the oppressed to target. When the center becomes visible, however, the oppressed are presented with the condition for the possibility of examining the source of pain, raising the potential for combating and destroying it.

Tyler Kessel, “Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*.” *Explicator* (Summer 2004).

Other characters in *A Thousand Acres* also recognize and fear the poison that unites their bodies and the land. ... Marv appears in good health and spirits; like almost all of the men in the novel, he does not sicken in any visible way from the poisons in the environment. Indeed, Marv profits directly from the farming practices that lead to bigger farms, larger mortgages, newer tractors, and the expansion of debt in Zebulon County.

The women, however, die from the poisons they ingest. With uncanny regularity, the farm wives of Iowa die young. ... By exploring the ways in which Smiley turns her literary forebear to new uses, we find a sophisticated feminist novel that parodies one of the most revered plays of the Western canon.

Susan Strehle, “The Daughter’s Subversion in Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*.” *Critique* (Spring 2000).

Anyone who reads *A Thousand Acres* cannot help asking this same question about the eating habits of the farmers who inhabit this midwestern novel. Smiley’s aptly named Cook family is always cooking or eating, and much of the food sounds heavy and unappetizing. ... What does Smiley mean by constantly placing her characters in front of a plate especially when that plate is so often filled with bland, stick-to-the-fibs food? ... In fact, we can draw a direct connection between the blandness of the food the Cook family eats and the self-denying, pinched lives they live. This novel deals largely with the complications that lie beneath the calm, healthy appearances of midwestern farm life. And what could seem more harmless than bland food? ... The lack of flavor suggests zestless living—a hunger for something more satisfying. Furthermore, even the raw ingredients that make up the Cook family meals are more insidious than they seem. Supposedly pure well water turns out to be laced with poisons that furtively kill off the women and cause their miscarriages; vegetables are chock full of insecticides, and meats are tainted with drugs. Also, cooking itself appears deceptively unimportant: but proves to be a source of both power and oppression. ... From the opening scene at Harold Clark’s pig roast, to the last page of this novel, where Ginny reflects on the connection between her sin of poisoning Rose’s sausages and her father’s incest, food and the way it is served mirror her submission to and final rebellion against the Cook family patriarchy.

Catherine Cowen Olson, “You Are What You Eat: Food and Power in Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*.” *Midwest Quarterly* (Autumn 98).



Discuss Jane Smiley's comments in the interviews below and consider their relevance to her narrative stance in *A Thousand Acres*.

Dave: Another essay you published in *Harper's* drew an enormous amount of attention, the one about *Huck Finn* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Smiley: It generated a huge amount of antagonism, and that really did surprise me because I truly believe *de gustibus non est disputandum*, "about taste there is no disputing."

All I wanted to say in that essay is that I found *Huck Finn* boring and I found *Uncle Tom's Cabin* much more interesting than anyone had ever suggested it could be, but the response from male America was mind-boggling. I couldn't believe it. People attributed all kinds of bad qualities to me—I was on drugs, I was stupid, I didn't have any artistic talent to begin with. I wondered about that, the virulence of the response. Was it because these people had recently read *Huck Finn* or did it simply count as some kind of boyhood icon, the Huck Finn lifestyle, that I wasn't allowed to demean? (<http://www.powells.com/authors/smiley.html>)

Q: In one of your postings, you wrote: "The Right is a constant and the Left is intermittent." What do you mean by that?

Smiley: The Left in America is constrained by the Constitution, and the left edge of the Constitution isn't very far left. The Right, however, has a lot of tradition on its side: the tradition of vigilantism, the tradition of arms-bearing, the tradition of racism, the tradition of don't tread on me, the tradition of ruthless exploitation of the natural world. These are standard American ways. Only as people become more sophisticated in their thinking and more educated do they realize that taking what others have just because you can is actually inhumane and immoral and unethical. (http://www.progressive.org/mag_intv1207)

Jane Smiley doesn't do autobiography. You won't find her in Ginny, the narrator of her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*, or in any of the ensemble cast of her wicked academic satire, *Moo*. "I don't write to investigate my own life or sensibility," says the tall, elegant author. "I write more to investigate the world." (http://www.bookpage.com/9804bp/jane_smiley.html)