Faces and Places of My Heart

LEE SMITH

NORTH CAROLINIANA SOCIETY
Chapel Hill, North Carolina • 17 May 2012

Faces and Places of My Heart

LEE SMITH

Together with Tributes to Lee Smith
on the Occasion of Her Acceptance of the
North Caroliniana Society Award for 2012

17 May 2012

NORTH CAROLINIANA SOCIETY
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Introduction

THE NORTH CAROLINIANA SOCIETY

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www.ncsociety.org

Chartered on 11 September 1975 as a private nonprofit corporation under provisions of Chapter 55A of the General Statutes of North Carolina, the North Caroliniana Society is dedicated to the promotion of increased knowledge and appreciation of North Carolina's heritage through the encouragement of scholarly research and writing in and teaching of state and local history, literature, and culture; publication of documentary materials, including the numbered, limited-edition North Caroliniana Society Imprints and North Caroliniana Society Keepsakes; sponsorship of professional and lay conferences, seminars, lectures, and exhibitions; commemoration of historic events, including sponsorship of markers and plaques; and through assistance to the North Carolina Collection of UNC-Chapel Hill and other cultural organizations with kindred objectives. The Society is administered by an entirely volunteer staff and a motto of "Substance, not Show."

Founded by H. G. Jones and incorporated by Jones, William S. Powell, and Louis M. Connor, Jr., who soon were joined by a distinguished group of North Carolinians, the Society was limited to a hundred members for the first decade. It elects from time to time additional individuals meeting its strict criterion of "adjudged performance" in service to their state's culture—i.e., those who have demonstrated a continuing interest in and support of the historical, literary, and cultural heritage of North Carolina. The Society, a tax-exempt organization under provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, expects continued service from its members, and for its programs it depends upon the contributions, bequests, and devises of its members and friends. Its IRS number is 56-1119848. The Society administers a fund, given in 1987 by the Research Triangle Foundation in honor of its retiring board chairman and the Society's longtime president, from which more than 300 Archie K. Davis Fellowships have been awarded for research in North Carolina's historical and cultural resources. The Society also sponsors the North Caroliniana Book Award, recognizing a book that best captures the essence of North Carolina; the William Stevens Powell Award to a senior student who has contributed most to an understanding of the history and traditions of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and the H. G. Jones North Carolina History Prizes for winners in the National History Day competition.

continued

A highlight of the Society's year is the presentation of the North Caroliniana Society Award to an individual or organization for long and distinguished service in the encouragement, production, enhancement, promotion, and preservation of North Caroliniana. Starting with Paul Green, the Society has recognized Albert Coates, Sam J. Ervin Jr., Sam Ragan, Gertrude S. Carraway, John Fries Blair, William and Ida Friday, William S. Powell, Mary and James Semans, David Stick, William M. Cochrane, Emma Neal Morrison, Burke Davis, Lawrence F. London, Frank H. Kenan, Charles Kuralt, Archie K. Davis, H. G. Jones, J. Carlyle Sitterson, Leroy T. Walker, Hugh M. Morton, John L. Sanders, Doris Betts, Reynolds Price, Richard H. Jenrette, Wilma Dykeman, Frank Borden Hanes Sr., Maxine Swalin, Elizabeth Vann Moore, W. Trent Ragland Jr., W. Dallas Herring, John Hope Franklin, Betty Ray McCain, Joseph F. Steelman, William B. Aycock, Fred Chappell, Henry E. and Shirley T. Frye, Robert W. and Jessie Rae Scott, James E. Holshouser Jr., Bland Simpson, Lindsay C. Warren, Jr., Lee Smith and, on its sesquicentennial, the North Carolina Collection.

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1978 — Paul Green
1979 — Albert Coates
1980 — Sam J. Ervin, Jr.
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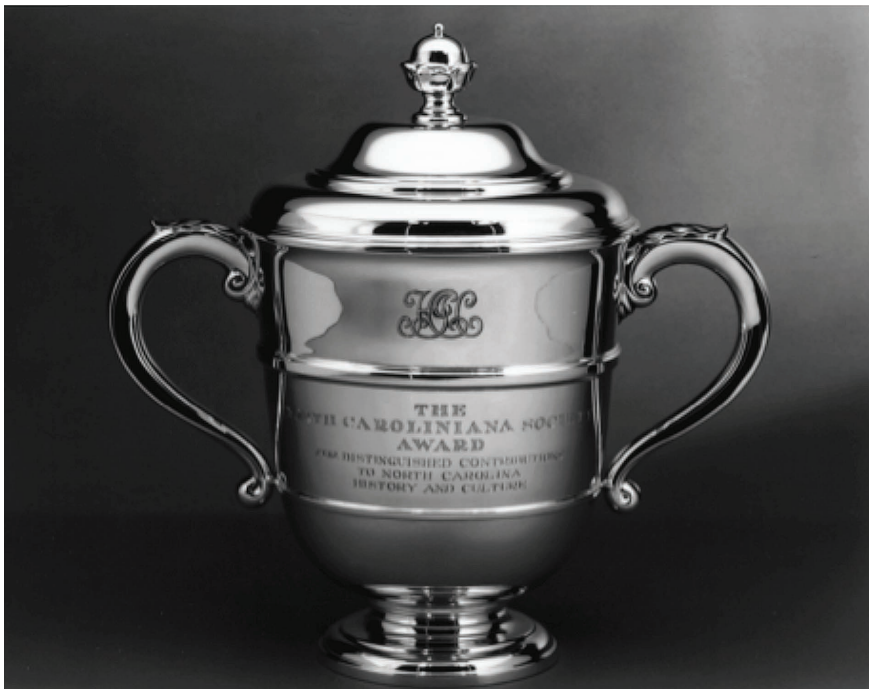
1983 — John Fries Blair
1984 — William C. & Ida H. Friday
1985 — William S. Powell
1986 — Mary D.B.T. & James H. Semans
1987 — David Stick
1988 — William McWhorter Cochrane
1989 — Emma Neal Morrison
1990 — Burke Davis
1991 — Lawrence F. London
1992 — Frank Hawkins Kenan
1993 — Charles Kuralt
1994 — H.G. Jones
1994 — Archie K. Davis
1994 — North Carolina Collection
1995 — J. Carlyle Sitterson
1995 — LeRoy T. Walker
1996 — Hugh MacRae Morton
1997 — John L. Sanders
1998 — Doris Waugh Betts



ABOVE: The original cup is in the North Carolina Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill's Wilson Library.

1999 — Reynolds Price
2000 — Richard H. Jenrette
2001 — Wilma Dykeman
2002 — Frank Borden Hanes, Sr.
2003 — Maxine Swalin
2004 — Elizabeth Vann Moore
2004 — W. Trent Ragland, Jr.
2005 — W. Dallas Herring
2005 — John Hope Franklin
2006 — Betty Ray McCain
2006 — Joseph F. Steelman
2007 — William B. Aycock
2007 — Fred Chappell
2008 — Henry E. & Shirley T. Frye
2008 — Robert & Jessie Rae Scott
2009 — James E. Holshouser, Jr.
2010 — Bland Simpson
2011 — Lindsay C. Warren, Jr.
2012 — Lee Smith

NORTH CAROLINIANA SOCIETY IMPRINTS NUMBERS 1-51 (1978-2012)

No. 1. *An Evening at Monticello: An Essay in Reflection* (1978) by Edwin M. Gill

No. 2. *The Paul Green I Know* (1978) by Elizabeth Lay Green

No. 3. *The Albert Coates I Know* (1979) by Gladys Hall Coates

No. 4. *The Sam Ervin I Know* (1980) by Jean Conyers Ervin

continued

No. 5. *Sam Ragan* (1981) by Neil Morgan

No. 6. *Thomas Wolfe of North Carolina* (1982) edited by H. G. Jones

No. 7. *Gertrude Sprague Carraway* (1982) by Sam Ragan

No. 8. *John Fries Blair* (1983) by Margaret Blair McCuiston

No. 9. *William Clyde Friday and Ida Howell Friday* (1984) by Georgia Carroll Kyser and William Brantley Aycock

No. 10. *William S. Powell, Historian* (1985) by David Stick and William C. Friday

No. 11. *"Gallantry Unsurpassed"* (1985) edited by Archie K. Davis

No. 12. *Mary and Jim Semans, North Carolinians* (1986) by W. Kenneth Goodson

No. 13. *The High Water Mark* (1986) edited by Archie K. Davis

No. 14. *Raleigh and Quinn: The Explorer and His Boswell* (1987) edited by H. G. Jones

No. 15. *A Half Century in Coastal History* (1987) by David Stick

No. 16. *Thomas Wolfe at Eighty-seven* (1988) edited by H. G. Jones

No. 17. *A Third of a Century in Senate Cloakrooms* (1988) by William McWhorter Cochrane

No. 18. *The Emma Neal Morrison I Know* (1989) by Ida Howell Friday

No. 19. *Thomas Wolfe's Composition Books* (1990) edited by Alice R. Cotten

No. 20. *My Father, Burke Davis* (1990) by Angela Davis-Gardner

No. 21. *A Half Century with Rare Books* (1991) by Lawrence F. London

No. 22. *Frank H. Kenan: An Appreciation* (1992) edited by Archie K. Davis

No. 23. *Growing Up in North Carolina*, by Charles Kuralt, and *The Uncommon Laureate*, by Wallace H. Kuralt (1993)

No. 24. *Chancellors Extraordinary: J.Carlyle Sitterson and LeRoy T. Walker* (1995) by William C. Friday and Willis P. Whichard

No. 25. *Historical Consciousness in the Early Republic* (1995) edited by H. G. Jones

No. 26. *Sixty Years with a Camera* (1996) by Hugh M. Morton

No. 27. *William Gaston as a Public Man* (1997) by John L. Sanders

No. 28. *William P. Cumming and the Study of Cartography* (1998) edited by Robert Cumming

No. 29. *My Love Affair with Carolina* (1998) by Doris Waugh Betts

No. 30. *A Single but Huge Distinction* (1999) by Reynolds Price

No. 31. *Richard Jenrette's Adventures in Historic Preservation* (2000) edited by H. G. Jones

No. 32. *Sketches in North Carolina USA 1872 to 1878* (2001) by Mortimer O. Heath; edited by H. G. Jones

No. 33. *Roots and Branches* (2001) by Wilma Dykeman

No. 34. *Glimmers in the Gloaming* (2002) by Frank Borden Hanes, Sr.

No. 35. *Coming of Age in North Carolina's Fifth Century*, by Maxine Swalin and *The North Carolina Symphony*, by John L. Humber (2003)

No. 36. *Reflections* (2004) by W. Trent Ragland, Jr.

No. 37. *Photographers in North Carolina: The First Century, 1842-1941* (2004) Essays by Stephen E. Massengill, H. G. Jones, Jesse R. Lankford

No. 38. *North Carolina Conundrum* (2005) by John Hope Franklin

No. 39. *Poetical Geography of North Carolina* (1887; 2006) by Needham Bryan Cobb

No. 40. *The Goodliest Land* (2006) by Betty Ray McCain

No. 41. *Hayes: The Plantation, Its People, and Their Papers* (2007) by John G. Zehmer, Jr.

No. 42. *Center of the Universe* (2007) by Fred Chappell

No. 43. *William B. Aycock: Our Champion* (2007) by Judith W. Wegner

No. 44. *Nathaniel Macon of North Carolina* (2008) by William S. Price, Jr.

No. 45. *Robert Scott and the Preservation of North Carolina History* (2009) by H. G. Jones

No. 46. *A Historic Occasion* (2009) by Shirley Taylor Frye and Henry E. Frye

No. 47. *Surprise of the Century* (2009) by James E. Holshouser, Jr.

No. 48. *The Colonial Records of North Carolina* (2010) edited by William S. Price Jr.

No. 49. *The Grandfathers* (2010) by Bland Simpson

No. 50. *A Resumé of Two Historic Adventures* (2011) by Lindsay C. Warren, Jr.

No. 51. *Faces and Places of My Heart* (2012) by Lee Smith








Photos by Jerry Cotten

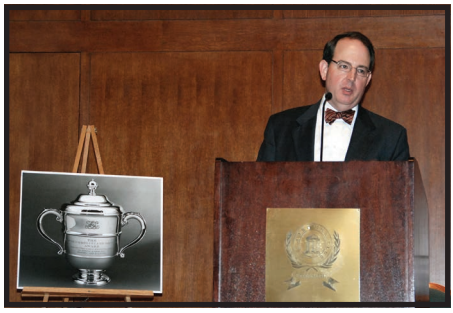
FIRST ROW: *Lee Smith with President Willis P. Whichard upon acceptance of the North Caroliniana Society Award; Lee Smith and Hal Crowther*
SECOND ROW: *Lee Smith; Secretary-Treasurer Martin H. Brinkley*
THIRD ROW: *Lee Smith; Lucinda H. MacKethan*
FOURTH ROW: *Lee Smith; Barbara Bates Smith*

Introductory Remarks

MARTIN H. BRINKLEY

At this point in our program, it is traditional to say something about the North Caroliniana Society. So I will say two sentences: Our passion is North Carolina and our motto is "Substance, not Show." This means that we do rather than talk about doing, and we seek service rather than publicity. For example, we did not seek publicity for this event, because we wanted it to be held in the presence of Lee Smith's family and close friends.

Not all of you heard Lee's remarks this afternoon, but no need to ask for copies, because they, along with the full proceedings of this meeting, will be published later this year in our *North Carolina Imprints* series, a complimentary copy of which will go to you in the mail. For that reason, in choosing our speakers, we try to think of persons who have unique perspectives on our Award recipient and who can put into the public record (for that is what the *Imprints* will do) some aspects of the recipient's life that may otherwise go unrecorded. For Lee Smith, that is a challenge, but we are up to it.



Jerry Cotten

ABOVE: *Martin H. Brinkley*

LUCINDA H. MACKETHAN

Our first speaker is Lucinda MacKethan.

Dr. MacKethan is Alumni Distinguished Professor of English emerita at North Carolina State University, where she taught courses in American literature, African American literature and southern writers and served as coordinator of the teacher-certification program in English. A director of several National Endowment for the Humanities summer institutes for high school and college teachers, she also worked with the National Humanities Center to implement in-service enrichment programs for high school faculty. Her publications include *Daughters of Time: Creating Woman's Voice in Southern Story*, *The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in*

continued

Jerry Cotten

ABOVE: *Lucinda MacKethan*

Southern Literature, *Mark Twain's Mother: Gender, Slavery, and the Study of Southern Literature*, and the *Companion to Southern Literature*, which was named a Best Reference Work by the American Library Association.

Cindy and Lee have been friends ever since they were both students of Dr. Louis D. Rubin at Hollins College in the 1960s. They later taught together at North Carolina State University for many years. Cindy chaired the North Carolina Humanities Council from 2002 to 2005. Now she is senior consultant for the National Endowment for the Humanities' award-winning website *Scribblingwomen.org*. She lectures widely on the literature and culture of the Old South.

Please welcome Lucinda MacKethan.

Jerry Cotten

ABOVE: *Barbara Bates Smith*

BARBARA BATES SMITH

Famous for her off-Broadway adaptation and performance of *Ivy Rowe* from Lee Smith's novel *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Barbara Bates Smith has performed that play more than 600 times in theaters, colleges, and libraries all over the country. Barbara also tours with Lee Smith's *On Agate Hill*, *The Happy Memories Club*, and *B. Smith Does Lee Smith*, a sampler. *The C-Word: Her Own Cancer Story* and *Confessions of a Clergy Wife* round out her touring repertoire, along with *Our Own Stories* workshops. Barbara's favorite regional recent theater roles have been in *Wit, Hamlet, and Doubt*. Tonight's musician, Jeff Sebens, will accompany Barbara for a June 8 premiere of *Agate Hill to Appomattox*, a Civil War piece featuring material from Allan Gurganus's *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* and Lee Smith's *On Agate Hill* at Deep Dish Theater in Chapel Hill.

Please welcome Barbara Bates Smith and Jeff Sebens.

Lee Smith

Good evening, I would like to start off by thanking you all for coming—so many dear and familiar faces here before me—and to thank especially my husband, Hal Crowther. Not only am I not the only writer living in our house in Hillsborough, I am certainly not the best writer living in our house! Or the best critic, or the best wordsmith or historian, or the most knowledgable philosopher. I really depend on Hal, who has given me not only a beloved daughter, Amity, but also has offered perspective—the long view—and especially facts; I'm still not big on facts!—plus many healthy doses of irony, along with companionship and risotto—he's a great cook—over all these years.

And now for my talk, which I have entitled, "Faces and Places of My Heart."

FACES AND PLACES OF MY HEART

While I have to admit that I am not Tar Heel born and Tar Heel bred, there's a pretty good chance that I will be Tar Heel dead, and I want to say that I am proud to claim you—I like calling North Carolina home! Of course, all writers are natural aliens—onlookers, outliers, eavesdroppers, spies and misfits—but North Carolina has always made me feel about as welcome as a person has got any right to feel.

People are always asking me why this state produces so many writers, and I'd like to answer that—it's not that we produce so many writers, it's that we know what to do with them when we get them. We recognize them; we nurture them. We help them find an agent instead of putting that novel into the dresser drawer forever. I believe that there are fine new writers everywhere, but many of them are not getting published—they don't have mentors—they don't have writing groups or classes or organizations that foster and encourage new writing, such as our own North Carolina Writers Network or our North Carolina Humanities Council.

They don't have the tradition we have—which may be almost unique to North Carolina—of many of our greatest writers actually teaching in our colleges and universities. These teaching writers are like flying kites trailed by the strings of their students. This tradition started early—with Guy Owen at North Carolina State trailed by Robert Morgan, or William Blackburn at Duke trailed by Anne Tyler and Reynolds Price and James Applewhite and Fred Chappell, for instance—then Fred Chappell trailed by Kay Byer. It's sort of like that part in the Bible, where so-and-so "begat" so-and-so, who "begat" another so-and-so. For instance, Louis Rubin taught me, then I taught Jill McCorkle, who taught Sarah Dessen. . . .

This goes on and on. It is still going on, in these and many many more colleges all over our fair state. We have so many fine teaching writers, such as Ron Rash and

continued

Photos by Jerry Cotten

PRESENTATION OF AWARD TO LEE SMITH:

Willis P. Whichard: *The original of the large cup pictured here (pointing) is in the North Carolina Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill's Wilson Library. The original contains the names of the North Caroliniana Society Award recipients since the society's beginning. Lee Smith's name will soon be added to that distinguished list. Each year a small replica of that cup is presented to the recipient as a personal keepsake to symbolize the award. I will now ask Lee to come forward to receive this cup and to make such remarks of acceptance as she may wish.*

Pam Duncan at Western Carolina University, or Joseph Bathanti at Appalachian State University, Clyde Edgerton at UNC-Wilmington, David Payne and Elizabeth Strout at Queens University, Michael Parker at UNC-Greensboro, for instance. We even have graduate programs in creative writing now, offering the MFA—that's the Master of Fine Arts degree—at UNC-Wilmington, Queens University, Warren Wilson College, UNC-Greensboro, and North Carolina State University and probably others that I don't even know about.

We may be producing more writers than we can publish, in fact, but we're working on that too, with new presses springing up all over the place to augment our well-known publishers such as Algonquin, where Louis Rubin and Shannon Ravenel found and published the work of Clyde Edgerton, Kaye Gibbons, Daniel Wallace, and Jill McCorkle, to name just a few, or UNC Press, which publishes Bland Simpson along with many another native son and daughter. Recently a brand new publishing company down in Wilmington, Lookout Books, attracted national press when its very first publication, a collection of short stories by Edith Pearlman entitled, *Binocular Vision*, won the National Book Award.

By and large, our writers are not weird withdrawn artistic types, either, but community-minded folks. Every Christmastime, for instance, Hillsborough writers Allan Gurganus and Michael Malone don their top hats to act out Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* to a packed house for two benefit performances. Clyde Edgerton's band has played for every charitable cause.

Our writers are also accessible. Sarah Dessen told me she got up the nerve to sign up for a writing class because she kept seeing me in the grocery store, and I was buying the same stuff she was. Haven Kimmel accosted me in the ladies room of Barnes and Noble to ask if she could be in our creative writing program over at State, and I said "sure." I should add that this proved to be a class that also contained Darnell Arnoult, Lynn York, and Virginia Boyd, who would all go on to publish their own highly-regarded novels. I believe in paying it forward, passing it on, as a way of honoring my own teachers—especially Louis Rubin—for their support and encouragement when I was a young writer myself.

But I also want to take this time to pay tribute to two more of my own special heroes. Doris Betts died only this past April, after waging a year's battle with lung cancer. The only child of two millworkers, Doris was born in Statesville, attended UNC-Greensboro, and went on to write six novels and three collections of short stories. Earthy and funny, Doris was unflinching in her honesty. One time I overheard her counseling a student who had asked her, "What should I do if I really want to be a writer?" To which Doris answered, "Honey, I think you ought to stop if you possibly can!" She wasn't kidding. Writing was a sacred lifelong commitment for Doris, a way of worship. Like Flannery O'Connor, she found grace in the hard rock ground of her fiction. She never pushed her beliefs on anybody, but as she said to me one time, laughing, "Listen, if you see a little mouse running across my pages, that mouse is a Christian mouse!"

continued

Doris also told a story that I have never forgotten. When she and her husband Lowry had three little children and were living in graduate student housing, she answered a knock at the door to find the older writer Frances Gray Patton there. Miss Patton handed her a check for a thousand dollars, "for baby-sitting," she explained, "so you can keep on with your writing." Doris was floored. But she later passed this kind of practical generosity on herself, to countless students at UNC, where she was revered. She passed it on to me, too, at a crucial time in my life.

Even though I desperately needed it at the time, I would never have had the nerve to apply for a full-time teaching job at North Carolina State University if Doris hadn't pushed me into it. I didn't have the academic credentials. "Don't give me that crap," Doris said. "Just go for it." (A motto, I suggest, that covers just about anything!)

Many years later, when I retired from my eighteen-year teaching career at NC State, I had Miss Patton's gesture—and Doris's encouragement—in mind when I started a yearly award for women in our graduate writing program at NC State, naming it in honor of Robbie Knott, one of our best young women graduate student teachers who had died much too soon of cancer. It's not much—just a thousand dollars each year, which doesn't go very far—but at least it will buy her some babysitting.

I also want to take this occasion to honor Elizabeth Spencer, another hero, well-known to many of you. I wrote my senior thesis in college on Elizabeth Spencer's work. I have always admired both her artistry and her bravery, for even back in 1956, Elizabeth was not afraid to deal with the forbidden theme of racism in her compelling novel, *The Voice at the Back Door*, which caused her to become estranged from her family and ostracized in Mississippi. Many years later, when Elizabeth Spencer and her husband moved to Chapel Hill, I couldn't believe it. I actually got to know her! And we have become girlfriends. I have been so happy that her recent memoir *Landscapes of the Heart*, her collected short stories, *The Southern Woman*, and the hit musical made from her novella *The Light in the Piazza* have thrust her back into the public eye and consciousness. Though she will celebrate her 91st birthday this summer, Elizabeth is still writing and traveling, just as interested in people and politics as ever. Right now she is in New York City, but I want to urge you all to join me in continuing to celebrate this remarkable woman and her remarkable life.

And now I want to mention the places in North Carolina where I have lived, for I am, above all, a writer of place.

Chapel Hill—that green and magical stone-walled town where I was first a summer school student myself in the 60s, then a young wife and teacher at the Carolina Friends School in the 70s, the town where we raised our children—and where I married my "new" husband, Hal Crowther, who is certainly not "new"

any longer!—twenty-five years ago at the Chapel of the Cross. I also love Carrboro, where we had our wonderful sushi restaurant, Akai Hana for so many years. It's still going strong.

Ashe County—where we have a beloved little cabin near West Jefferson. Like my daddy always said, "I need me a mountain to rest my eyes against." That would be Laurel Mountain, which I have been "resting my eyes against" for over twenty years.

And finally Hillsborough—where Hal and I live in a very old house right on the main street, a place that inspired what is perhaps my most heartfelt novel, entitled *On Agate Hill*, set in Hillsborough and Ashe County during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

I started telling stories as soon as I could talk—true stories, and made-up stories, too. It has always been hard for me to tell the difference between them. My father was fond of saying that I would climb a tree to tell a lie rather than stand on the ground to tell the truth. In fact, in the mountains of southwestern Virginia where I grew up, a lie was often called a story, and well do I remember being shaken until my teeth rattled with the stern admonition, "Don't you tell me no story, now!"

But he was hardly one to talk. Both my mother and my father were natural storytellers themselves. My mama—a home-economics teacher from the Eastern Shore of Virginia—was one of those southern women who can—and did—make a story out of thin air, out of anything—a trip to the drugstore, or something somebody said to her in church. My father liked to drink a little and recite Kipling out loud. He came from right there, from a big mountain family of story-telling Democrats who would sit on my grandparents' porch and place twenty-five-dollar bets on which bird would fly first off a telephone wire. They were all big talkers. Many is the night I fell asleep on somebody's lap on that porch while listening to a story, told by somebody who loved me. To this very day, when I'm writing, stories always come to me in a human voice—often it's the voice of the main character, but sometimes it's just the voice of the story itself, coming out of the dark.

So I got hooked on stories early, and as soon as I could write, I started writing them down. I always hated for my favorite little books to end, so I'd write more and more pages onto the ends of them. I wrote my first novel on my mother's stationery when I was eight. It featured as main characters my two favorite people at that time: Adlai Stevenson and Jane Russell. In this "novel," they fell in love and then went west together in a covered wagon. Once there, they became—inexplicably—Mormons! Even at that age, I was fixed upon glamour and flight, two themes I returned to again and again as I wrote my way throughout high school, then college—Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia, a very fortunate choice for me, as it was here that I encountered Louis D. Rubin, who would be my writing teacher for four years and my friend for life, and also fell in with a spirited group of like-minded girlfriends who were writing, too. In fact, to use an old mountain phrase, they were all just as "eat up" with writing as I was.

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After reading the fiction of Mississippi writer Eudora Welty and the eastern Kentucky novelist James Still, who used the Appalachian language of my childhood and set his stories on the steep mountain slopes I knew so well, I began to understand Mr. Rubin's instructions to "write what I knew." I realized that all those old mountain stories I had heard as a child might be some of the best I would ever hear. I understood that they might, in fact, be literature. So I began writing seriously—often setting my stories in the Appalachian mountains of southwest Virginia—then later broadening the field to include North Carolina, which has been my beloved home state now for forty years.

And all these decades later, I'm still at it. I'm still writing. Stories remain as necessary to me as breathing, as air. I write for the reason I've always done so: simply to survive. To make sense of my life. I never know what I think until I read what I've written. And I refuse to lead an unexamined life. No matter how painful it is, I intend to know what's going on. I intend to be there. And the writing itself is often a source of strength for me.

In 2003, I had done a lot of historical research but had barely begun a novel when my son Josh died in his sleep at age thirty-three. My grief—and rage—were catastrophic. I became completely nonfunctional. I cried all the time. I lost thirty pounds. Weeks passed, then months. I was wearing out my husband and all my friends. Finally I went to a psychiatrist, a kind rumpled man who formed his hands into a tent and listened to me scream and cry and rave for several weeks.

Then came the day when he held up his hand and said "Enough."

"What?" I stared at him.

"I am going to give you a new prescription," my psychiatrist said, taking out his paper and pen. He began to write.

"Oh, good," I said, wanting more drugs, anything.

He ripped out the prescription and handed it to me.

"Write fiction every day," it said in his crabbed little hand.

So I did that. I started. And that novel, entitled *On Agate Hill*, which I'd planned as the diary of a young girl orphaned by the Civil War, just took off and wrote itself. Molly Petree begins her diary on May 20, 1872, in Agate Hill, North Carolina, writing: "I know I am a spitfire and a burden. I do not care. My family is a dead family, and this is not my home, for I am a refugee girl. . . ." Molly's spitfire grit strengthened me as she proceeded to "give all her heart," no matter what, during a passionate life journey that would include love, betrayal, motherhood, and grief (of course, grief). But by the time we were done with it, Molly and I, two years later, she had finally found a real home, and I could find my way to the grocery store. I could laugh. And yes, through the mysterious alchemy of fiction, my sweet Josh had managed to find his own way into the final pages of that novel after all, as a mystical bluesman and healer living wild and free in the deep piney woods of North Carolina that he used to play in as a child.

My psychiatrist's prescription may benefit us all. Writing cannot solve our problems, but it can clarify them. 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.

Now I want to close by reading a few sentences from that novel, *On Agate Hill*. This is from the part where Molly is leaving the mountain in Ashe County where she has lived with her beloved husband Jacky, who has just died. You may not get all the references here but I know you will get the gist of it—it's all about places, and people, and our attachments to them, literary and otherwise.

> *As we left, I twisted around in the carriage seat to look back just before we disappeared into the trees, for I have always fancied that I could see the whole wide curve of the earth at that moment, stretching across the bald. There it was. It was enough. I thought of my stone babies upon their mountain, and Jacky in his grave. The family would buy a stone for Jacky later, I knew, though I doubted that it would keep him put, for he was a travelling man. I had to smile. I remembered how, as a girl, I always thought I could not leave Agate Hill, that I could not leave my ghosts. Now I understand that love does not reside in places, neither in the Capulets' tomb nor in the dales of Arcady nor the Kingdom by the Sea nor in any of those other poems that I read so long ago, love lives not in places or even bodies but in the spaces between them, the long and lovely sweep of air and sky, and in the living heart and memory until that is gone too, and we are all of us wanderers, as we have always been, upon the earth.*

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Remarks by Lucinda MacKethan

Lee Smith, whom we so appropriately honor tonight as the recipient of the 2012 North Caroliniana Society Award, is quite clearly in it for the long haul. Between 1968 and 2012, a period of 44 years (but who's counting), she has published 16 works of fiction—12 novels and 4 short story collections, and she has a new novel coming out this year. That is a living definition of a long haul, an average of something like one book every 2.6 years, books that have garnered major awards and made Lee one of America's most distinctive and respected literary voices. Thank goodness, the audience of North Carolina friends, family, and admirers gathered here know all about the awards and honors, so we do not have to list them this evening. As someone who met Lee before she published her first novel, and years later counted her as the best of colleagues in NC State's English Department, I have treasured our long friendship. It gives me many, too many, memories and stories on which to draw, and not nearly enough time to do her work—and and her own wonderful self—justice. Lee once said that the value of stories is in how they provide us with "a way to hold on to what is passing." So I will be trying to talk with this purpose in mind, as though someone sitting on a porch swing one night might have asked, "tell me about Lee Smith."

We came to Hollins in 1963: Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, and the Hollins Group, as one book title has described us. We came from a little bit of everywhere, which for Lee meant Grundy, Virginia, where parents Ernest and Gig gave her by nature and nurture a writer's beginning if there ever was one. Their humor, generosity, their own lifelong habit of paying attention to the world, were clearly passed on to Lee, along with, as Ernest put it, "the mountains to rest her eyes against."

When the class of 1967 arrived at Hollins, we were told—and it was a BIG mistake to tell us—that we were an unusually "bright" class—with SAT scores some 20 to 30 points higher than those of the upperclassmen. In a list sent to us of items to bring to campus was included "white gloves." But we chose as our class motto, "Anarchy and Arrogance Forever." Trouble was brewing. Lee was one of the leaders of our first revolt, which took place when as freshmen we published a collection of our own work, aptly entitled *Beanstalks*. We had no choice. The upperclassmen had accepted only one entry from our class for the college's official literary magazine. What were they thinking? We sold out our 500 copies in less than a week.

At Hollins our class grew up together, making many mistakes but always with a kind of manic, quirky good will that made us hard to punish. During our four years, great changes took place all around us—the assassination of John Kennedy two months after we arrived affected us profoundly, but other forces internal and external began to change us even earlier. For summer reading, we were given a just published book that certainly contradicted the white gloves: the book was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. As best I can recall, we hardly paid any attention to it, even though we were living portents of the breakout to come. And we certainly paid no attention to the white gloves.

Another book, assigned by our freshman creative writing professor, poet John Allen, should have confused us even more. He assigned Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* as a kind of narrative source book. In Campbell's collection of hero legends in world mythology, all the heroes were men, all the women were monstrous Medusas or Patient Penelopes, and none of us was supposed to be brave. Somehow, however, we missed that point, and no one more than Lee. From first to last, her fiction offers an absorbing gallery of portraits—daughters, mothers, lovers, wives—girls and women, who might begin with the expectations that they will be forever fair and tender ladies, but who all discover within themselves the heart of a hero struggling to be much more.

When Lee graduated, she took with her a Book of the Month Club prize for a manuscript that became her first novel, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*. She wrote it, she has said, because Louis Rubin told her she not only could but should. It is impossible that Louis would not enter the story at this point: many of us went to Hollins because he was making it a place where students—and that meant WOMEN students—could become writers. What he gave all of us are the 3 C's that Lee has paid forward to her own legion of appreciative students: Confidence, Community, and a Passion for Craft. Louis would give you that look—the one that said, Just do it. But at the same time he surrounded you with other people just as serious as you were about writing. And if you wrote something too highfalutin, he would scrawl in the margin of your precious piece of work, "Some Pumpkins."

Lee took every lesson to heart and went off to climb the beanstalk. She published four novels and completed her first story collection, *Cakewalk*, before she came to NC State in 1981, and then, while teaching and mentoring, program directing and children-raising, she published in the next six years three works that constituted a great, giant leap forward, novels in which she demonstrated her complete mastery of voice, of narrative density and balance, of language, and the subtleties of place and memory: *Oral History* in 1983, *Family Linen* in 1985, and *Fair and Tender Ladies* in 1988 proved she was quite simply, a force of nature, the Red Emmy of the literary world.

During the time that these three novels were bringing her national awards and audiences, Lee was at her post, Tompkins Hall on Hillsborough Street in Raleigh, doing what she has always done incomparably—being an audience

continued

for her students' writing, taming her surly colleagues in senior faculty meetings, teaching—and, who knows when, writing up a storm. Her years at NC State, from 1989 to 1998, laid the groundwork for the graduate creative writing program there that prospers today. Her students from North Carolina—Jill McCorkle, Darnell Arnoult, Pam Duncan, Sarah Dessen, and Haven Kimmel, to name just a few, have bloomed where she helped to plant them. They are fine, successful writers and many of them also amazing teachers, like their beloved mentor.

Lee was not made to stay put within the halls of any academe. When someone would call her "Professor," she was likely to say, "My goodness, I've never *professed* anything." Retiring from NC State freed her only to work even harder: to lead women's writing workshops from Alaska to Maine; to insure the success of the Hindman Settlement School's Adult Learning Center that she established with her Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Award, to become the guardian angel of literacy for all of central North Carolina; and to take new kinds of risks as a writer, with stories and novels that consistently move out into new territories, from place to place, from distinctive voice to distinctive voice, right on down to Mrs. Darcy, and to the saga of spitfire and burden Molly Petree in *On Agate Hill*.

There is no way to end tonight's story without going back to a day some twenty-five years ago, give or take one or two, when a treaty was signed between two completely opposite states of mind. The marriage of Lee Smith, who once won the title of southwestern Virginia's Miss Bituminous Coal, and Hal Crowther, born a Damn Yankee as far north as you can go, is a merger still to be marveled over. Someone once said that Hal was a projector for Lee's dark and gloomy side, while she projected Hal's sweetness and light, but that's nonsense of course. Lee and Hal together have danced out many darknesses and lifted up each other into the light with beautifully matched fortitude and grace. And they are light throwers, as well, sharing an insistence with truth seeking that keeps giving us exquisite, explosive moments, in story and essay, that are, as Grannie Younger would say, truer than true.

I have just one more memory of Lee to share. One time we were in the Atlanta airport, on our way to catch a plane back to Raleigh after a literary conference. You know those long, three-story escalators that take you down to the trains there. When we got to one of these, and started heading down down down, Lee was in the middle of telling me a story. And suddenly I noticed that all around us, whether they were going up or down, people had stopped talking and were leaning toward us, just like in an EF Hutton commercial. All those people were straining to hear the story, transported by its voice. And while they couldn't and wouldn't ever know what the story was about, they knew it was a really GOOD one, and they didn't want to miss it. That is why we are here with Lee tonight. She is always giving us a really great story, and she is always too good to miss.

"She's Turned into a Mountain Woman"

BARBARA BATES SMITH

"She's turned into a mountain woman. She's moved to the mountains, she plays the dulcimer, she clogs, she's taken up quilting. She's turned into Ivy Rowe!" That's what prizewinning novelist Lee Smith, southwest Virginia native, says about me.

I'm proud of that. An actress by trade, I'd been touring with my one-woman show, *Ivy Rowe*, based on the spunky Appalachian heroine of Lee's novel, *Fair and Tender Ladies*. And I'd moved to the mountains of Western North Carolina, a suitable base for touring. I'd taken a lot of teasing from my peers: "You're just trying to become this mountain woman you've been portraying." No denial here. And "Ivy Rowe" and I are still going strong after twenty-one years and close to 700 performances.

"You must be crazy—A one-woman play from *Fair and Tender Ladies*?" Lee remembers chiding me. "This novel is all letters; it's about *writing*!" Later she admitted, "I would've said flatly no, if you hadn't been so feisty. But I thought to myself, 'This woman is just like Ivy Rowe,' and so I said yes." That did it. Lee Smith and her character, Ivy Rowe, changed my life and career.

ON THE GO WITH "IVY ROWE"

I had no claim of identity with Ivy or her setting, except having grown up in the part of Alabama that might be considered the foothills of the Appalachian range. But I'm an actress, and when I read the newly published *Fair and Tender Ladies* in 1988, I was determined to play Ivy—on street corners if necessary. Fortunately, Mark Hunter, artistic director of Playmakers Theatre in Tampa, fell for this passionate mountain woman just as I had. He agreed to co-adapt, direct, and produce the one-woman play, *Ivy Rowe*, which opened in Tampa in 1989. Novelist Lee Smith was in the audience, and none of us could have guessed what would follow. Ivy simply took on a life of her own, and I have followed after her—New York, Edinburgh, Salt Lake City—all over the map. Oh, but before playing in New York, Lee wanted Ivy to pass muster in her hometown of Grundy, Virginia. *Ivy Rowe* played in the very auditorium where Lee was once crowned "Miss Grundy High School" and later "Miss Bituminous Coal."

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LOU CRABTREE, A MODEL FOR "IVY"

As I was leaving Grundy for Abingdon, Virginia, Lee said, "Be sure to meet Lou Crabtree." Oh yes, I remembered, she was the mountain woman who had once tottered into Lee's creative writing class there. In the opening exercise, Lou's first line from her story made Lee gasp in delight: "Aunt Reller had 13 miscarriages, and she named ever' one of 'em." I was eager to meet this model for Ivy Rowe. White-haired, leaning on her stick, Lou called out from her front porch, "Is this Barbara Bates Smith? You better be something with a name like that!" Inside the house, I reluctantly turned down offers of items to use for the show: a witch's broom, kerosene lamps, and a "burrel" (burial) dress. She snapped, "You're not just gonna sit down and read out some letters, are you? I like a play that has some action to it!" After seeing the show, Lou took both my hands in hers and pronounced what felt like a papal blessing: "Honey, don't you change a thing!" She predicted great success for the show. "I used to tell fortunes," she said, "but I got so good at it, I had to quit."

OFF-BROADWAY AND BEYOND

Lee says that when she wants to empower a heroine, she sends her to the mountains. And I, empowered by Lou as well, was off to New York. The big question: Would these sophisticated, theater-savvy audiences welcome this mountain woman? I gave them five minutes to sit back in their "show me" posture. Then I smiled to myself as Ivy slowly but surely seemed to empower them.

I myself became further empowered with my move to the mountains—encountering a Blue Ridge musician from Cana, Virginia, to provide musical accompaniment on hammered dulcimer, lap dulcimer, and banjo. Lee Smith has declared Jeff Sebens "a genius as accompanist, seamlessly making the music a major, integral part of the story." Now Jeff and I are touring with *Ivy Rowe*, plus my other stage adaptations of Lee Smith works: *On Agate Hill*, *The Christmas Letters*, and *B. Smith Does Lee Smith*, a sampler.

Lee asks if I ever get tired of playing Ivy Rowe. Never. I love it every time. If six months go by with no Ivy, I get restless. Ivy both grounds me and lifts me up. The way she looks life in the face, says yes to it, makes mistakes, but always manages to "keep on keepin' on." Sometimes I don't know where this mountain woman ends and I begin. I don't care. I'm having too much fun.

Photos by Jerry Cotten

TOP ROW: *Lee Smith with Bonnie Ferrell; Lucinda H. MacKethan and Lee Smith*
MIDDLE ROW: *Willis P. Whichard and Hal Crowther; H. David Bruton*
BOTTOM: *James Clark presented the North Caroliniana Society Book Award to David Silkenat for* Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, and Debt in Civil War North Carolina *(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011)*



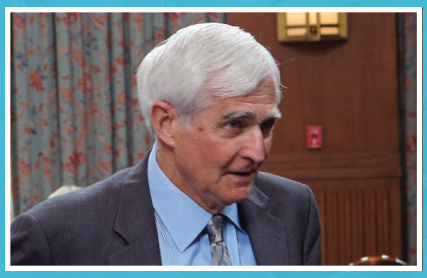







Photos by Jerry Cotten










Photos by Jan Hensley

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