

# Books

## Eschewing modern sensibilities, Smiley shines with 'Lidie'

By MATTHEW BUDMAN  
Special to The Times

It's tough to separate Jane Smiley's new book from the politics surrounding it. In 1996, she wrote a contentious essay for Harper's in which she took *Huckleberry Finn* to task: It, she charged, sidestepped taking a moral stand on slavery and had a cop-out conclusion. Worse, the 1940s critics who deemed Twain's classic the Great American Novel had ignored the social novelists — mostly women — who were Twain's contemporaries and whose work was, Smiley insisted, more significant.

As an alternative to *Huckleberry Finn*, she offered Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, remembered for its abolitionist fervor and profound societal implications but not for its ethical and literary import.

Smiley's audience — fans, and students of literature — lashed out at her on the Harper's letters pages. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, more than one reader sniffed, was sentimental tripe, whereas Twain had not only dealt with the subject of slavery head-on but had wrapped it up in an exciting adventure tale.

It comes as no surprise then that Smiley should follow this little contretemps with an attempt to reinvent the social novel, to combine Stowe and Twain. And the result, *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton*, is indeed an adventure story that addresses the moral questions of slavery. But the novel isn't quite what you might expect. Smiley doesn't go the route of either Twain or Stowe; her tale takes a fascinatingly ambiguous view of the battle over slavery in the wild Midwest, a conflict that presaged the Civil War. It's ambitious and original, a good read that continues to yield more with more consideration.

THE NOVEL'S VOICE is that of a tall, plain, 20-year-old woman who is without strong convictions on "the goose question," as the slavery issue is dubbed. When we meet our housework-averse narrator, it's 1855 in sti-

### THE ALL-TRUE TRAVELS AND ADVENTURES OF LIDIE NEWTON

By Jane Smiley  
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fling Quincy, Ill. (territory that itself remains undecided on slavery), and Lidie's dozen older sisters are trying to unload her by marrying her off "to the first stranger to pass through Quincy, or the second, or the third." They're taken aback by the man she chooses, though: a Massachusetts abolitionist on his way to help settle Kansas Territory and ensure that it joins the Union as a free state.

Although the Kansas weather is famously temperate, and Lidie's fiancé, Thomas Newton, insists that the news of regional conflict is exaggerated, once they're in Lawrence, a city founded the previous year by Massachusetts abolitionists, the couple runs into trouble. The locals, dubbed Border Ruffians, usually armed and always quick to take offense, are hardly thrilled with do-gooders moving in and telling them how to behave. With the law on their side, they lay formal and informal siege to the town.

The climate is hardly the Eden that was promised: "Thomas Newton and I had found blistering heat, relentless winds, cracking tempests, cold wet misery, and cold frozen misery." All in all, it's a struggle to survive, and many — husbands, wives, children — don't. "The Kansas prairie was full of graves where people had buried everything they loved, everything they knew," Lidie says.

And then the unthinkable happens: Thomas is gunned down by Border Ruffians (don't howl — you'll have learned this already from the book jacket). Lidie finds herself totally unmoored, and at the same time tied to a town that appears doomed and to a philosophical cause

she's never entirely embraced. Telling no one, she impulsively cuts her hair short, dons her dead husband's trousers, and sets out to find the murderers.

That's the book's first half; Lidie ventures further into unfamiliar slave territory and does, indeed, have travels and adventures exciting enough to keep any reader going. And she's forced to test the strength of her convictions on slavery.

LIDIE IS AN intriguing heroine: She's clearly independent, performing transgressive and rebellious acts against her family and the state, and yet she defines herself largely through her husband — his thoughts, his opinions. Thomas's passion gives her agency to make the choices she does, but she's not free to make those choices until his death.

On her own, she loses track of her origins: At one point, traveling under an assumed identity, Lidie ends up a guest in a comfortable home where the young, delicate mistress of the house offers a blunt contrast in situations. "I had lost every single thing, including, at the moment, my very name and history," Lidie muses. "Right beside me, practically right in the room with me, was the other life that I had not managed to live. . . . And yet I had gotten onto a different track entirely, and I had followed it to this room, among these strangers."

Busting slaves handle the chores at this house, the first time Smiley presents us with the real live catalysts for all the political turmoil. Slaves are an absent presence in the novel — most of the abolitionists have never met one, and most of the thugs determined to roust the Bay Staters don't own any. It's largely abstractions and ideals that drive Lidie's adopted abolitionist community, and she keeps a slight distance from their ardor: Her hatred of "slavocrats" is driven not by their advocacy of the institution but by their ill-treatment of the abolitionists. Lidie's stance provides her, and us, with a unique vantage point.

SMILEY HAS PROVED herself an astonishingly versatile novelist: *Moo* is a hilarious satire of campus life, *A Thousand Acres* a sweeping Midwestern farm tragedy, *Ordinary Love* and *Good Will* a pair of domestic dra-

mas, *The Greenlanders* a tale of 13th-century island life, *Duplicate Keys* a mystery.

She's able to pull off these variegated subjects and settings because her writing style is unusually unaffected; Lidie's voice is no exception. But here, on the surface, the polish doesn't always work to the book's advantage: Despite authentically quaint chapter headings ("I Am Surprised and Then Surprised Again"), the language is almost too studied and unspontaneous to be convincing. Lidie's Massachusetts emigrants use flawless English; the Border Ruffians say "jest" for "just," "shoul'da" for "should have" and "them" for "those" but otherwise speak in long, complex sentences full of dependent clauses. The slaves fare far worse, speaking in a laboriously heavy dialect: "De girl done laundered dat shirt and dem stockin's" and "someplace lak dat." Sometimes the detailing seems particularly odd: One slave refers to "Arkansas," which is, of course, how "Arkansas" is pronounced, so why is it spelled differently when a slave says it?

But the eyes that see something strange in that delineation are today's eyes. At second glance, *The All-True Travels* is more authentic for its 1850s fastidiousness. Smiley has captured the troubled and troubling politics of the times with accuracy and verve, and with remarkably little encroachment by modern sensitivities, considering her very public pronouncements on the by-today's-standards morals of Twain and Stowe.

Most potential Smiley readers, of course, will have missed the Harper's debate. Not a problem. Politics aside, this is an ambitious novel well worth picking up, whether *The All-True Travels* is a send-up of *Huckleberry Finn*, as has been suggested, or simply a perceptive revisiting of America's flash point of division. Smiley may have lost her case for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but in creating a complex, appealing feminist protagonist and setting her in a provocative narrative, she's contributed far more to American literature than if she had won.

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