

# A Thousand Acres

by Jane Smiley

## StoryLines Midwest Discussion Guide No. 11

by David Long  
StoryLines Midwest  
Literature Consultant

### About the author

Born in 1949, Jane Smiley grew up in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. She attended Vassar College and earned M.A., M.F.A., and Ph.D degrees from the University of Iowa. She taught at Iowa State University from 1981 until 1996. Smiley's first two novels, *Barn Blind* (1980) and *At Paradise Gate* (1981), both set in Iowa, take on obsession and upheaval within families, as do the short stories in her 1987 collection, *The Age of Grief*. *Moo* (1995), her first novel after winning the Pulitzer Prize for *A Thousand Acres*, is a dark comedy satirizing academic life. Her most recent novel, *Horse Heaven* (2000) is a sprawling, high-spirited account of the life surrounding Thoroughbred racing. Smiley has written articles and personal essays for many magazines, including *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Nation*. She lives in California with her son and two daughters, and 16 horses.

### Discussion questions

Family ownership of the land has been an element of Midwestern life from the time of early settlement. In the past several decades, many families have been forced to sell land that has been theirs for a century or more. What effects might this have on the families? Their communities? On the land itself? On the Midwest?

Larry Cook is considered a successful farmer. Ginny says he believes in the "farmer's catechism" (*What is a farmer? A farmer is a man who feeds the world*—see above.) Is this portrayal a stereotype? How accurate is it?

After a tragedy, we often think: *If only* . . . But we realize that the feelings a tragedy generates *depend* on things going wrong. Some things we're asked to accept in *A Thousand Acres* are Larry's unreasonableness, the daughters letting him have his way, Ginny's sudden hatred of Rose, Pete's death, the collapse of Ginny's and Ty's marriage. Do you have trouble believing any of these? Why do you think Smiley considered them necessary?

In Shakespeare, Goneril poisons Regan in revenge for Regan's affair with Edmund. In *A Thousand Acres*, the poisoning of Rose never comes off, but there are several other instances of poisoning. What is their relation to the book's central ideas about the ownership of land? If "poisoning" can also be understood as a metaphor, which relationships in the novel have been poisoned, and by what?

### Additional reading

Jim Heynen. *One-Room Schoolhouse: Stories About the Boys*, 1993.  
Verlyn Klinkenborg. *Making Hay*, 1986.  
Meridel LeSueur. *Winter Prairie Woman*, 1990.  
Jane Smiley. *The Greenlanders*, 1988.  
*Ordinary Love & Good Will: Two Novellas*, 1989.  
*The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton*, 1998.  
*Horse Heaven*, 2000.  
Douglas Unger. *Leaving the Land*, 1984.  
Will Weaver. *A Gravestone Made of Wheat*, 1989.

StoryLines America is supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and administered by the American Library Association to expand American understanding of human experience and cultural heritage. Additional support from Barnes & Noble  
©2001 American Library Association



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE  
HUMANITIES

BARNES & NOBLE  
BOOKSELLERS

# StoryLines America

A Radio/Library  
Partnership Exploring Our  
Regional Literature





## A Thousand Acres

by Jane Smiley

The setting is Zebulon County, Iowa, 1979, a farm of one thousand acres, “as flat and fertile, black, friable, and exposed as any piece of land on the face of the earth.” Larry Cook is lord of this dominion. He proposes to retire and turn the operation over to his three daughters and their husbands. The oldest is Ginny, married to patient, hard-working Ty. Rose, whose husband is Pete Lewis—handsome, mercurial, once a musician—is the middle daughter. Caroline, the youngest, is the one who got away, a lawyer about to be married to Francis, also a lawyer.

Larry’s decision seems sudden, and perhaps ill-conceived. Ginny and Rose—long in the habit of bowing to their father’s wishes—agree with his plan. Only Caroline exhibits a momentary doubt. “I don’t know,” is all she says, but Larry responds: “You don’t want it, my girl, you’re out. It’s as simple as that.”

Readers are quick to spot the parallels to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. The daughters’ names correspond easily to Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. Larry Cook’s neighbor Harold Clark is Gloucester, with his two sons, Loren (the legitimate Edgar) and Jess (the bastard Edmund). Larry Cook, stripped of work, his singular purpose in the world, grows eccentric, then increasingly irrational, out of touch. Like Lear, he wanders in a storm, raging against his treatment at the hands of his family. There are several kinds of poisoning and a blinding. And the novel *feels* like a tragedy, moving unstopably toward disintegration and death.

Why would a modern writer openly risk comparison to a great work? Perhaps it’s an act of homage to the staying power of classic stories; perhaps it was impossible to imagine the Cook family without bumping up against Shakespeare’s towering model. Perhaps, as reviewer Christopher Lehmann-Haupt points out, using Lear serves to give “what might have seemed a lurid prairie melodrama the dimensions of a classical tragedy.”

Smiley herself has suggested in an interview that this retelling began with the desire to comprehend the actions of the two “evil” sisters. Whatever her motives, the pleasure of reading *A Thousand Acres* (1991) doesn’t depend on recognizing the elements of *Lear*. Smiley’s novel has its own agenda, its own angle. As writer Ron Carlson says, she “takes the truths therein and lights them up her way, making the perils of family and property and being a daughter real and new and honest and hurtful all over again.”

*A Thousand Acres* is grounded in the daily facts of farm life in the Midwest—the division of labor, the seasonal rotation of jobs, the details of getting crops to market. The reader is schooled in Slurrystores and the “finishing” of hogs, in bean-spraying and prices per bushel, in “The Farmer’s Catechism” (*What is a farmer? A farmer is a man who feeds the world. What is a farmer’s first duty? To grow more food. What is the farmer’s second duty? To buy more land. What are the signs of a good farm? Clean fields, neatly painted buildings, breakfast at six, no debts, no standing water. How will you know a farmer when you meet him? He will not ask you for any favors.*)

For all that, Smiley’s novel is awash with ideas, with moral speculation on the nature of ownership. If you own land, she asks, do you have the right to do whatever you wish to it? To what degree do you own your children? Is your reputation so valuable it justifies keeping up appearances at all costs? What rights do men have over women and girls? When the time comes, how should you surrender ownership? The answers that emerge are difficult. They require a thorough rethinking of everything once held to be true and worthy.

Shakespeare’s play has no narrator, no one standing between us and the characters. But *A Thousand Acres* is told by one of its players, Ginny Smith. She’s the family’s caretaker—accepting, almost ploddingly ordinary compared to her sisters, never one to address her own pain (she’s had five miscarriages, and, like Rose, was the target of Larry Cook’s sexual abuse as a girl).

Ginny gives us the facts as she knows them, without exclamation or histrionics. When she makes bald statements about the life there (“People in Zebulon County see friendliness as a moral virtue.”), we trust her. Though Jess Clark is the character who introduces ideas about organic farming, it’s plain-spoken Ginny who has the real feeling for the environment of the farm:

*For millennia, water lay over the land. Untold generations of water plants, birds, animals, insects, lived, shed bits of themselves, and died. I used to like to imagine how it all drifted down, lazily, in the warm, soupy water—leaves, seeds, feathers, scales, flesh, bones, petals, pollen—then mixed with the saturated soil below and became, itself, soil. I used to like to imagine the millions of birds darkening the sunset, settling the sloughs for a night, or a breeding season, the riot of their cries and chirps, the rushing hough-shhhh of twice millions of wings, the swish of their twiglike legs or paddling feet in the water, sounds barely audible until amplified by millions. . . .*

Ginny is also keenly sensitive to when she and the others pass each point of no return. Telling the story, she has the awful luxury of hindsight, but even at the time things happen, her instincts fill her—then us—with foreboding. When her father first proposes his retirement scheme, she hears “that inner clang”; later, she turns to Jess Clark and says, “Remember this day. This is the day that everything I worried about came to pass.”

*A Thousand Acres*, Smiley’s fifth novel, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1992, and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1991. It received widespread praise from reviewers and had a long run on the bestseller list. In 1997 it was made into a film. “Smiley’s novel is about the power and the entrapment of the land,” wrote Donna Rifkind in the *Washington Post*. “It is also about the power and the entrapment of love, which, along with bitterness and hatred, keeps the Cook family writhing poisonously, desperately together to the end.”