

# TRUE GRIT JANE SMILEY'S HISTORICAL SAGA OF A SPIRITED FRONTIER WOMAN WHO TAKES UP THE ABOLITIONIST CAUSE IN 1850S KANSAS

Elizabeth Graver. Elizabeth Graver is the author of "Unravelling," a novel set in 19th Century New England. She teaches at Boston College. . Chicago Tribune ; Chicago, Ill. [Chicago, Ill]. 12 Apr 1998: 1.

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

An enormously gifted and protean writer, she has led her readers to (among other places) 13th Century Greenland ("The Greenlanders"), the rural Midwest in the late 1970s ("A Thousand Acres") and a contemporary university ("Moo"). Now, in her powerful new novel, "The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton," Smiley takes us back to Kansas in 1855, a place of rising passions and vast uncertainties. Narrated in the spirited, unsentimental voice of 20-year-old Lidie Newton, the novel is at once an ambitious examination of a turning point in history and the riveting story of one woman's journey into uncharted regions of place and self.

Lydia Harkness is 20 when her father dies, leaving her orphaned and living with a much older half-sister in Quincy, Ill. Soon thereafter, she meets Thomas Newton, a New Englander on his way out to the Kansas Territory to join the abolitionists who are fighting for the area to enter the Union as a free state. Lidie, looking for adventure and a new life, swiftly marries Newton and goes with him on his journey west, where they are soon joined by her 12-year-old nephew Frank. Naive and immature, Lidie finds herself thrust into the middle of what later came to be known as "Bloody Kansas," where abolitionist free-staters clashed with slaveholding Missourians in a violent prologue to the Civil War. In much the same way that she married Newton, knowing next to nothing about the man, Lidie takes up the abolitionist cause quite unthinkingly—"perhaps . . . as a way of being courted," she later tells us, "and, my sisters would have said, out of pure contrariness, as well."

## FULL TEXT

A JOURNEY OF UNDERSTANDING.

THE ALL-TRUE TRAVELS AND ADVENTURES OF LIDIE NEWTON

By Jane Smiley

Knopf, 452 pages, \$26

In her introduction to the 1995 edition of "Best American Short Stories," Jane Smiley writes that "finally, the thing that all good short stories offer is a sudden and ineluctable experience of something not ourselves, a character, an incident, a place more or less distant from who and where we are. . . . We give ourselves up to it." Smiley might have been writing here about her own novels.

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("Moo"). Now, in her powerful new novel, "The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton," Smiley takes us back to Kansas in 1855, a place of rising passions and vast uncertainties. Narrated in the spirited, unsentimental voice of 20-year-old Lidie Newton, the novel is at once an ambitious examination of a turning point in history and the riveting story of one woman's journey into uncharted regions of place and self.

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The novel charts Lidie's gradual coming to knowledge—knowledge of Thomas Newton, whom she grows to love and then loses to murder; knowledge of the complex internal contradictions of the abolitionists and the pro-slavery factions; and eventually, genuine knowledge of the slaves' plight and of the power—both blatant and covert—of their oppressors. We follow Lidie from Illinois to a land claim on the "pathless" prairie, where there is "white frost over everything, inside the cabin and out," and, "Nothing, it seemed, could be touched without pain." We follow her from a steamboat to a newspaper office, from a lean-to built of hay to a lavish slave plantation—each world rendered in sharply lucid prose and filled with wonderful period detail. Along the way, she meets all manner of thieves, charlatans, ruffians and crooks, and she shows herself, by the end, to be as wily as (though more moral than) the worst of them.

As Lidie forges a path through this landscape, she comes to a slow understanding not only of her surroundings, but also of herself. In Kansas, she tells us at one point, "everything was turned upside down." In this raw, inchoate place, she is able to pick up and shed ideas and identities like pieces of clothing, trying on different selves in a world where lawlessness and chaos are the norm. First a wife, then a young widow, she soon disguises herself as a pro-slavery boy and goes alone to Missouri to seek revenge on her husband's killers. "What you've got when you go in disguise," she tells us, "are some feelings that belong to your original self and some feelings that belong to your new self and are feigned feelings in many ways, but some of these feelings overlap, and it's a job trying to keep them separate and identified." Later, when she is taken in and pampered by a slave-owning family, she takes on yet another false identity as a pro-slavery woman. "It astonished me," she says, "that I had lost every single thing, including, at the moment, my very name and history."

By tracing Lidie's attempts to make and remake herself, Smiley has written a novel that is, among other things, an exploration of gender roles in 19th Century America and the ways the westward expansion offered women the possibility for reinvention and change. The Kansas Territory "is the only place for a woman," Lidie's friend Louisa tells her, "especially a woman of verve and imagination." In "losing" her name and history, Lidie tries to construct a new self, one less burdened by the strictures of her old life, though this, like everything else in the novel, proves complicated, as eventually her old life circles back to her again. Less ambiguously, Lidie is able, as a narrator clearly focused on the shaping of her tale, to craft a story about her place in history that she has the voice and the authority to tell.

Like other contemporary novels set in the 19th Century (among them, Toni Morrison's "Beloved," Margaret Atwood's "Alias Grace" and Russell Banks' "Cloudsplitter," which also takes place in Bloody Kansas), "The All-True

Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton" both mimics the past and filters it through a modern-day lens. Stylistically, Smiley has borrowed many conventions from 19th Century novels and frontier narratives, creating a playful, knowing pastiche. Like many 19th Century texts, each chapter of "The All-True Travels" opens with an epigraph, but the fact that the quotes are all drawn from an etiquette handbook "for the Use of Young Ladies at Home" gives them an ironic contemporary twist, as does the way Lidie reads the handbook religiously, then systematically ignores it. Other details also mimic 19th Century texts. Each chapter is quaintly titled; for example, "I Am Hopeful, and Receive a Surprise," "I Am Swept Up by Events." When a character curses, Lidie relays it as " `G--d--.'" The slaves' dialogue is written in exaggerated dialect (though one slave can perfectly mimic her white master's speech), and Lidie is politely circuitous, though not utterly silent, in her treatment of such subjects as pregnancy and sex.

Yet in Lidie's meditations on identity as constructed and history as vexed and ambiguous, we feel the power of Smiley's backward glance, so that the novel works beautifully on two levels at once, always echoing with late-20th Century concerns. Only now and then does a slight awkwardness intrude; early on, Smiley uses dialogue among peripheral characters to get across details about the political situation in Kansas, and we feel her struggling to ground us in this other time.

Most of the time, though, Lidie's story reads like a long and various dream, brightly colored and brilliantly observed--a journey into a world as troubled, ambiguous and full of life as our own, where "every version of every story (is) equally true and equally false, owing to the complexity of every set of circumstances."

### Illustration

PHOTO GRAPHIC; Caption: PHOTO: (Book cover.) GRAPHIC (color): Illustration by Judie Anderson.

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