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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

On Agate Hill

by

Lee Smith

(Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2007)

Author:

Lee Smith is the author of twelve novels as well as three collections of stories. Her previous novel, *The Last Girls*, was a *New York Times* bestseller as well as a co-winner of the Southern Book Critics Circle Award. The recipient of an Academy Award in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1999. Smith lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina. [From the book jacket]

Summary:

Molly Petree, orphaned by the Civil War, is by her own definition “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.” Raised in the ruins of a once prosperous plantation on Agate Hill in North Carolina, she’s a refugee who has no interest in self-pity. To document her headstrong life, she collects its artifacts—her lifelong diaries, letters, poems, songs, newspaper clippings, court records, marbles, rocks, dolls, bones (some human, some not).

When a mysterious benefactor appears out of her father’s past to rescue her, teenage Molly Petree never looks back. Taking what she is offered, she saves herself and then risks everything to hold true to her nature and to true love. She casts aside two prosperous, well-born suitors to marry a dashing—and philandering—mountaineer only to be accused of his murder. The end of Molly Petree’s story is as unpredictable and as passionate as her own wide-open heart. Spanning half a century, Lee Smith’s portrait of a fiery Southern woman recalls the South from Reconstruction to the Roaring Twenties—and, in the process, gives us Molly Petree, living and breathing, gripping the reader’s arm as the story unfolds. [From the book jacket]

Questions:

1. Early on, Molly writes in her diary, “I want to be a real girl and live as hard as I can in this world, I don’t want to lie in the bed like Mama or be sick like Mary White. Or be a lady. I would rather work my fingers to the bone and die like Fan-nie. I want to live so hard and love so much I will use myself all the way up like a candle, it seems to me like this is the point of it all, not Heaven” (page 78). This says so much about Molly’s character. How do you think Molly came to reach this conclusion about her aspirations, and how do you think it shapes what happens later on in her life?

2. How do Nicky Eck's crimes against Molly affect the rest of her life?
3. *On Agate Hill* is a story within a story, told from many different perspectives. The novel opens with a letter from Tuscany Miller, a university student from the present day who is looking into her own past and the pasts of those who lived at her father's (Ava's) new home. What parallels can you draw from both stories, and why do you suppose the author chose to set it up this way? How would the book be different if the author left out the Tuscany Miller thread altogether?
4. Why does Mariah Snow take an immediate dislike to Molly? Is this a clue to what happened in Mariah's past? Do you believe people like or dislike other people because they possess similar qualities (either positive or negative)?
5. At the beginning of the chapter titled "Paradise Lost," Agnes Rutherford describes Agate Hill in a letter to her sister, Mariah Snow. She says that it is "surrounded by an air of loneliness" and "Defeat. Failure. Loss. Decay" (page 132). She goes on to say that "the interior of the house was so unkept as to appear ransacked" (page 135). This is far different from what we are led to believe from reading Molly's journal. How do you think your reading experience would've been affected by knowing the true state of the plantation right from the very beginning?
6. What do you make of the author's choice to write a majority of the novel in journal entries and letters? How would the novel be different if she had chosen to tell the story using straight prose?
7. In the September 22, 1873, letter to her sister, Agnes relays the story of how Molly first came to be accepted by her peers at Gatewood Academy (page 157). Why did the rest of the girls choose to accept Molly instead of shunning her after Ida and Adeline Brown made fun of her background? What does this say about girls and group mentality?
8. In her May 3, 1874, journal entry, Mariah Snow writes (referring to women), "We lose our names as we lose our Youth, our Beauty, & our Lives" (page 163). What does this say about her character? About how women were treated in general at that time? How is that different from how women are treated now? Do you know women who feel the way Mariah does? Do you feel that way about your life?
9. What do you think happened to Mary White?
10. In the beginning of the section titled "Up on Bobcat," Agnes writes in her "Final Impressions," "I wonder if I could have done anything different, if I could perhaps have waited and chosen a less drastic course, and what would have happened then . . . but it is impossible to wrest a decision out of its time and place, and even now I cannot think what I should have done" (page 219). In your opinion, could things have been different? What are other possible outcomes? Would a different outcome

make the story less or more interesting in your opinion?

11. When Simon Black visits Molly in the mountains in February (page 241), Molly doesn't discuss with Agnes what transpired between them. What do you suppose was said?
12. After Jacky's funeral, why do you think Molly asks BJ to take her to Icy Hin-shaw's cabin, and then leaves without saying a word? Later, she asks BJ to give Icy and her children her house, the one she shared with Jacky. She says, "take care of them, for they are Jacky's. They are yours" (page 325). What exactly does she mean by this?
13. Who do you believe killed Jacky (with the first shot in the stomach, not the second shot in his neck)? Why do you suppose BJ helped Molly cover up what really happened to Jacky?
14. Discuss this quote: "love lives not in places nor 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 wanderers, as we have always been, upon the earth" (page 328).
15. What are the reasons behind Molly's decision to go back to Agate Hill in the end? How does this illustrate the change in Molly from the beginning of her life to the end of it?
16. Which character do you relate to the most in the book, and why?

[From ReadingGroupGuides.com]

Further Reading:

The Lost Diary of Don Juan: An Account of the True Arts of Passion and the Perilous Adventure of Love. Douglas Carlton Abrams. New York: Atria Books, 2007

The Hidden Diary of Marie Antoinette. Carolly Erickson. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.

The Year of Jubilo: A Novel of the Civil War. Howard Bahr. New York: Henry Holt, 2000.

Canaan: A Novel of Post-Civil War America. Donald McCaig. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.

Suggested Web Sites

Some of the characters in this novel are based on real historical figures that lived and worked at the Burwell School in Hillsborough, North Carolina. To learn more about the Burwell School visit their web site: <http://www.burwellschool.org/>

Listen to an interview with Lee Smith talking about *On Agate Hill* from the archives of *The State of Things* <http://wunc.org/tsot/archive/sot0920b.mp3/view>.