

LAUGHTER *in* THE AFTERNOON:

AN INTERVIEW WITH LEE SMITH AND JILL MCCORKLE

by Barbara Bennett

Two of North Carolina's favorite literary treasures are Lee Smith and Jill McCorkle. Their short stories and novels are widely read and critically acclaimed, and their impact on other writers is notable and far reaching. Lee Smith has published thirteen novels, four collections of short stories, and most recently, a collection of essays, *Dimestore: A Writer's Life*. She has won numerous awards including the Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Southern Book Critics Circle Award, and the North Carolina Award for Literature. Jill McCorkle has published four collections of short stories and five novels, most recently *Life After Life*. She is the recipient of a variety of awards, such as the New England Booksellers Award, the John Dos Passos Prize for Excellence in Literature, and the North Carolina Award for Literature.¹

Both writers live in Hillsborough, North Carolina, and have been friends since 1978 when McCorkle showed up as a student in the very first college course Smith taught. They recognized in each other a kindred spirit, which turned into a deep, meaningful, and productive friendship. Their friendship has grown through the years, through marriages, divorces, children, sickness, death, and changing careers. Through it all, they continued to write about the things that are important to both of them: family, relationships, the South, women.



COURTESY OF LEE SMITH

NOTES CONTRIBUTED BY THE NCLR STAFF

One of the things that makes North Carolina writers so special is their support of each other. No cutthroat writers allowed here, it seems. Just admiration, encouragement, and support. This is certainly true in the friendship between McCorkle and Smith. They read each other's work, attend each other's readings, and take time to care about each other's lives. They have even collaborated on a successful live production, *Good Ol' Girls*, which showcases both of their work, as well as that of musicians Marshall Chapman and

Matraca Berg. And it cemented their friendship, both literarily and personally.

In May, 2015, I met with these two writers at McCorkle's farm house, had lunch on her screened-in porch, and commenced to having the most fun you're allowed to have during an interview in the middle of the afternoon. The topic of conversation was initially their professional and personal relationship with each other, but as with many Southern women, their talk wandered into territories that were unexpected and delightful, and their conversation was punctuated by much laughter, which at certain times can only be described as hooting.²

ABOVE Jill McCorkle and Lee Smith at a fundraiser for the Women's Center, Chapel Hill, 9 Dec. 2010

¹ Lee Smith, *Dimestore: A Writer's Life* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2016); Jill McCorkle, *Life After Life* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2013).

² This interview was recorded on 13 May 2015. The transcription has been edited for clarity, flow, and format while remaining true to the voices and intentions of the speakers.