

## LEE SMITH GOES TO KEY WEST

a review by Sharon E. Colley

Lee Smith. *Silver Alert: A Novel*. Algonquin Books, 2023.

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**LEE SMITH** published her first novel in 1969; since then, she has written twelve more novels. Additionally, Smith has published four short story collections and a memoir. Her honors include the North Carolina Award for Literature, induction in the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame, and an Academy Award in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Read interviews with her in *NCLR* 2016 and 2021.

Fans of Lee Smith's work might at first consider her newest novel, *Silver Alert*, a departure for the critically acclaimed writer. Unlike Smith's most famous books, such as *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988) and *Oral History* (1983), *Silver Alert* is not set in the Appalachian Mountains or small towns of Virginia or North Carolina. Instead, it is set in sunny Florida, specifically quirky Key West. Additionally, instead of foregrounding a spunky female protagonist, as Smith did in *Saving Grace* (1995) and *Guests on Earth* (2013), *Silver Alert* begins with a male point of view. Rich, grumpy, and often foul-mouthed retiree Herb Atlas has been looking after his beloved third wife, Susan, in their pink Key West mansion. Susan has early onset dementia, and Herb has covered and cared for her. As Susan's condition has worsened and Herb has gotten cancer, their adult children (from previous marriages) want to place the pair in a care facility. It seems like the right thing to do. But Herb will fight it. Hard.

Despite the frequent association of her fiction with the Appalachian Mountains, Smith's texts have included town and non-mountainous settings throughout her career. *The Last Girls* (2002), for example, features locations on the Mississippi River, *The Devil's Dream* (1992) highlights Nashville, *Guests on Earth* includes scenes in New Orleans, and many short stories, while set in the South, are not in Appalachia.

Notably, the collection *News of the Spirit* (1997) includes the story "Live Bottomless," which ends with a family vacation in Key West; the story was reprint-

ed as Smith's recent novella, *Blue Marlin* (2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021). The novella is accompanied by a new essay, "The Geographical Cure," in which Smith explains that the story is loosely inspired by a trip she and her parents took to Key West.

Additionally, in her memoir, *Dimstore: A Writer's Life* (2016; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017), Smith includes an essay meditating on the death of her adult son, Josh. He enjoyed annual trips to Key West, and Smith's essay is framed by scattering his ashes on a sunset cruise off the island. So perhaps it is not surprising that Key West would eventually hold center stage in one of her novels.

And while Smith is known for her strong female protagonists, Herb Atlas is not the first central male character in her work. *Oral History*, for instance, gives one of the longest narratives to Richard Burlage, a self-involved young schoolteacher, while *The Devil's Dream* gives several chapters to R.C. Bailey, patriarch of a country music family. Still, Herb is distinct in Smith's fictional world: he is wealthy, retired, and besotted with his elegant third wife: "Susan enjoyed everything, and she had taught, or tried to teach, him to enjoy it, too" (10–11). Together, they became art patrons and recognizable local figures. He is anguished about how their lives are evolving and wants to hang on to some control.

Herb does not remain the dominant character in *Silver Alert*. Almost immediately, Dee Dee (calling herself Renee), who is from North Carolina, arrives to give Susan a mani/pedi. Observing how she finds



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ways to help Susan feel calmer and more present through singing and art, Herb hires her as a caretaker. Dee Dee thinks that her life is finally going well, with her odd new boyfriend and the unexpected new job. She is especially hopeful when she learns she is pregnant. The truth, however, is that Dee Dee's past has been tougher than anyone's should be, and her cheerful demeanor covers years of exploitation.

Though Herb's is the point of view for many chapters in the book, his narration is not first person. Rather, Smith uses a Tom

Wolfe technique referred to as the "downstage narrator" or what Lucinda MacKethan has called Smith's "close" third person narrator whose words are colored with the character's language,\* as in this passage: "Their house would go for a coupla mil right now. The song [doorbell] sounds again through the scented air of the solarium, big flowers blooming everywhere in here, Susan used to love them so, bless her soul and damn it all to hell" (1). While Herb isn't narrating here, the phrasing mirrors what words he would use, giving us a sense

of his character. This technique is used with other characters, too, like his adult children.

The book includes a variety of written artifacts, including poems and letters. And Smith employs first person in most of Dee Dee's chapters, beginning her first chapter, "I swear, it was all I could do to keep from skipping all the way down Washington street, skipping just like me and Martha used to do coming up the holler" (17). The language reveals her dialect and her character and creates a direct connection with the reader. As the novel unfolds, we gradually learn of Dee Dee's past. Dee Dee's later chapters use a limited omniscient narrator to delve further into her dark past, distancing both the character and the reader from the most jarring parts of Dee Dee's history.

I will confess that, at a certain point in the novel, I thought I'd figured out where the plot was going. While I wasn't wrong, I also wasn't right. Smith knows what she is doing, and the novel ends with that wonderful sense of surprise and inevitability found in good literature. Smith's publishing career has passed the half-century mark, and she continues to create vibrant fiction. Her texts include appealing voices, skillful manipulations of point of view, and a powerful combination of pathos and hope. *Silver Alert* is both in harmony with her previous fiction as well as a new direction for it. ■

ABOVE Lee Smith at Quail Ridge Books, Raleigh, NC, 19 Apr. 2023

\* Dorothy Combs Hill, *Lee Smith* (Twayne, 1992) 11; Lucinda MacKethan, "Artists and Beauticians: Balance in Lee Smith's Fiction," *Southern Literary Journal* 15.1 (1982): 10–11.