

JILL MCCORKLE AND LEE SMITH MINE THE PAST, AND BOTH FIND GOLD

a review by Barbara Bennett

Jill McCorkle. *Hieroglyphics: A Novel*. Algonquin Books, 2020.

Lee Smith. *Blue Marlin*. Blair, 2020.

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In *Requiem for a Nun*, William Faulkner writes the oft-quoted line, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."¹ **Jill McCorkle** has taken this quotation to heart in her newest novel, *Hieroglyphics*, by giving us a book in which characters dig through their memories to help them make sense of their present. Lil, half of a married couple who has moved from Boston to North Carolina in their eighties, lives almost completely in her past, reading through old diary entries and letters that she will leave for her two children when she dies. The entries and notes reveal the course and secrets of her marriage to Frank, a retired archeology professor, who once strayed from his marriage to have an affair with a younger colleague. Like Frank, who spent his life's work sifting through signs and symbols of the past, Lil is searching for her own Rosetta Stone to help her understand the hieroglyphics of their life together. Frank is also exploring his past, trying to get access to his old childhood home to see if the bottle of trinkets he left in the backyard is still there.

Examining the past and its influence on the present is not the only nod to Faulkner in this novel. In fact, McCorkle seems to channel Faulkner in many ways. The novel includes multiple characters through whose eyes events are told, even braving the mind of a six-year-old, much like Faulkner did in *As I Lay Dying*. In the short story "A Rose for Emily," Faulkner

describes the memories of Civil War veterans as "not a diminishing road, but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years."² Like much of Faulkner's work, McCorkle's story is not told chronologically, but rather the reader is given small snippets of stories through memory and its artifacts, like pieces of a puzzle that the reader has to put together to understand the tale. As Lil notes, "It's mysterious how fluid time has become for me; I wake and pour a glass and have no idea what I'll find" (15).

As is often true in Faulkner's work, McCorkle's novel is built around tragedy and violence. Both Lil and Frank lost parents at an early age, and they still seek to understand the meaning behind these random events. Neither one has completely accepted the unplanned abandonment of a parent, haunted as they both are by questions.

A third major character is Shelley, a court stenographer with a six-year-old son, Harvey. Shelley records word for word court cases about murders and rapes and bodies stored in freezers, and she, too, is affected by the "what ifs" of each tragedy. Her son, himself a victim of a cleft palate that has left him with a scar he covers with pretend moustaches, has absorbed these tragedies through his mother and his older brother, who is in college. Harvey can't help but repeat to

¹ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (Random House, 1951) 73.

² William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily," *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (Random House, 1950).



his friends the grisly things he has heard about, and Shelley seems at a loss about what to do to allay his fears, as she also confronts her own painful past.

In fact, this book is about being a child and trying to understand the grown-up world, but it's also about being a grown-up and realizing it still does not all make sense, especially when looking back and trying to comprehend childhood. The stories of the two families at first seem to be linked very tenuously: Shelley and Harvey live in the house where Frank grew up, and he comes by Shelley's house to ask to walk through it, only to be turned away by Shelley who is too unsure about just what this elderly gentleman wants. In the end, though, we find that old people and children have much in common, and there is a generational connection that ties the stories together.

McCorkle said in a phone interview that this is the novel she's wanted to write for a long time but hadn't been ready to write. It is definitely her darkest novel to date. Tragedies of all kinds abound in her earlier work, but they're always tempered by a wry sense of humor and scenes of comic relief. In *Hieroglyphics*, there is little to laugh at, although McCorkle believes that the novel is ultimately hopeful – a thin line of hope, surely. It is a sophisticated novel, though, as McCorkle brings us gently into the lives of her characters, filling in their stories gracefully, and making the reader comfortable being observers in their existence. Like most McCorkle novels, the plot is not the point; rather, it is the development of characters whose thoughts and memories open us up to the possibilities of living in this confusing world, either as a child or an adult.

Lee Smith also delves deeply into the past, but it is her own past – at least a fictionalized version of her past. In “Geographical Cure,” an addendum to her new novella, *Blue Marlin*, Smith tells us the “real” story, at least as real as memory can get.³ Smith writes that in January 1959, she and her mother and father drove south to Key West, FL, in order to “cure” her parents’ emotional ailments as well as their faltering marriage. The question is, why doesn't Smith just tell that story as nonfiction? Because, she writes, “I can tell the truth better in fiction than nonfiction. Real life is often chaotic, mysterious, unfathomable,” but with fiction, “you can instill some sort of order to create meaning, so that the story will make sense – where real life so often does not” (118).

Smith begins the tale long before the Key West trip, with

JILL McCORKLE is the author of eleven books, including *Creatures of Habit* (2001; reviewed in *NCLR* 2003), *Final Vinyl Days and Other Stories* (Algonquin Books, 1998; reviewed in *NCLR* 1999), and *Life After Life* (2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2014), all published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. She has won numerous awards for her fiction, including the New England Booksellers Award, the John Dos Passos Prize for Excellence in Literature, the R. Hunt Parker Memorial Award for Literature, and the North Carolina Award for Literature. She was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2018. She is a faculty member of the Bennington College Writing Seminars and a participating faculty member in the MFA program at NC State. She grew up in Lumberton, NC, and now lives in Hillsborough with her husband, Tom Rankin.

³ The story appeared as “Live Bottomless” in an earlier collection of short stories called *News of the Spirit* (1997; reviewed in *NCLR* 1998).

ABOVE Frances Mayes (right) talking with Jill McCorkle (left) about her new novel at a virtual booklaunch hosted by Flyleaf Books, Chapel Hill, NC, 28 July 2020 (Watch on Flyleaf's Facebook page.)

a paragraph that is one of the most engaging first paragraphs I've read in a long time. It's pure Lee Smith. It starts with protagonist Jenny's personal revelation that "In 1958, when my father had his famous affair with Carroll Byrd, I knew it before anybody" and ends with "Before, I'd been just any old thirteen-year-old girl on a bike. Now I was a *girl whose father was having an affair* – a tragic girl, a dramatic girl. A girl with a burning secret. Everything was different" (1). And dramatic she is, secretly spying on neighbors and imagining the most amazing things going on in her small town.

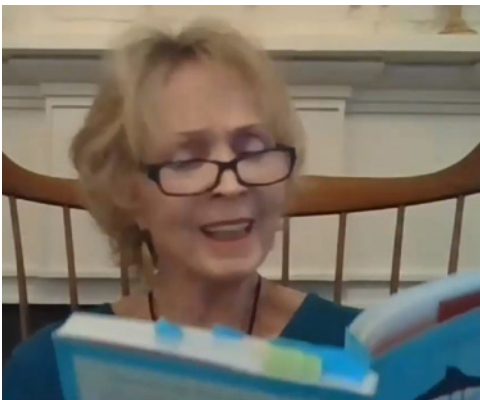
While Smith admits that "most of this book is my own creation" (121) and in fact her father never had an affair, an affair is just the spice the book and the thirteen-year-old Jenny need to add even more drama to her fledgling and so far, incons-

quential life. When the affair is unveiled and Jenny's mother has to spend time at a retreat to recover from the shock and humiliation, Jenny is sent to Cousin Glenda, a Bible-thumping Christian who somehow convinces Jenny that she must be good in order for her parents to reunite. Smith admits that "I just made Glenda up, feeling that I needed some humor at this point" (118), but I have to argue with that. The novel is packed with classic Smith humor, from absurd but endearing character traits (Jenny wants to be a professional mermaid at Weeki Wachee Springs when she grows up) to crazy (but true) details of cohabitating with movie stars in a motel called the Blue Marlin when they are in Key West, meeting Tony Curtis, and becoming extras in a movie called *Operation Petticoat*.

This is the kind of story that could only happen to Lee Smith, and she is the author to do it justice in its fictional retelling. Tales of initiation are a staple in American literature, but this one will make you smile more than most. Jenny does follow the classic pattern of separation, initiation, and return, and she does fight her own demons as well as the dragons in the world in order to come to a new understanding of life and love – and

the movies. But Smith does it so affably that the reader follows along jovially, enjoying the ride. Jenny doesn't become perfect, as she believes Cousin Glenda wants her to be, by doing a good deed every day (one of which involves taking gifts to prostitutes near her hotel in Key West). And it's not Jenny who saves her parents' marriage. But she is changed both physically and emotionally, as is the norm in tales of initiation. Near the end of the Key West visit, she notices "that I had gotten such a nice tan and a new haircut and had my ears pierced and did not have to be good anymore. I had *grown up*, I felt. I had been tongue-kissed, and lived among stars" (110). When she goes home and finally gets her period and grows breasts, something she had begun to believe would never happen, she admits, "I will never be really good again. I am not good. I am as ornery and difficult and inconsolable as Carroll Byrd" (113).

Smith claims that "of all the stories I've ever written, this one is dearest to me, capturing the essence of my own childhood" (117), but I hope it's not her last romp through her childhood. Let's all hope she has many more memories that can be turned into enchanting and, as Jenny would say, *dramatic!* tales. ■



COURTESY OF SIBA

ABOVE Lee Smith giving a virtual reading with the Reader Meet Writer program sponsored by the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance, 2 June 2020 ([Watch here.](#))

LEE SMITH was born in Grundy, VA, but now makes her home in Hillsborough, NC, with her husband, Hal Crowther. She has written seventeen books of fiction and a memoir, including *Dimstore: A Writer's Life* (Algonquin Books, 2016; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017). Her career has garnered numerous awards, including the North Carolina Award for Literature and the Southern Book Critics Circle Award. Her novel *Oral History* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1998) is discussed in essays in *NCLR* 1998 and 2008, and *The Last Girls* (Algonquin, 2002) is discussed in *NCLR* 2014. She was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2008. Read a new interview with her in the 2021 print issue of *NCLR*.