

## GROWING UP WITH TOBACCO TRUTHS

a review by Stephanie  
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Adele Myers. *The Tobacco Wives: A Novel*. William Morrow and Company, 2022.

If you have ever driven through Eastern North Carolina in deep summer, you know the beauty of a ripe tobacco field, full of lush plants with leaves wide enough to cover a squatting tobacco picker's back. You see its tall, spindly "sucker" flowers ready to be nipped away – or "topped" – to let the precious leaves continue to grow. And you smell the sweet scent of golden Bright Leaf tobacco when curing begins in the fall. These experiences are rarer now than they used to be. There is less tobacco grown, fewer people's lives connected to it.

Now, we know that smoking kills. Now, we know that cigarettes are especially harmful to pregnant mothers and their developing fetuses, but we didn't always. There was once only glory for tobacco in North Carolina: beauty, wealth, even supposed health benefits. The transition is the North Carolina period that Adele Myers explores in *The Tobacco Wives*, as tobacco and tobacco barons begin to fall from grace, and communities like Bright Leaf grapple with their identities and try to imagine their future. They are led in this novel by Maddie Sykes, a courageous fifteen-year-old girl grappling with what it means to be a woman.

It is 1946, and Maddie's life is in chaos. Her father recently died in the war. Her mother is struggling to cope with this loss and make ends meet. She sees a new husband as her ticket out and a teenage daughter as an impediment to finding one, so she packs Maddie up before dawn one morning and takes her to live with her aunt Etta in Bright Leaf for the summer. She doesn't call or write, so Maddie

is left to create a whole new self and a whole new life.

Aunt Etta is a skilled seamstress who sews ballgowns for the wives of the executives at the tobacco company, the "tobacco wives," as she calls them. These ladies of wealth and leisure keep Etta busy all summer sewing their gowns for the annual gala. Etta also sews uniforms for the women who have started working at the tobacco warehouses during the war, who may or may not get to keep those jobs once all the men return.

Maddie is thrown by her mother's abandonment but caught up in the glamour of assisting Etta in sewing for the tobacco wives. She enjoys creating beauty and developing her independence. She says, "I loved falling asleep among the fabric and the notions, dreaming of the endless possibilities in a bolt of cloth" (28). Maddie fantasizes about taking care of herself, building her own business, and she thrives when she is free to make her own creations.

Myers connects Maddie to several women in town – her aunt's friend (and hinted at lover), Frances; the working women at the warehouses; and most significantly, Mitzy, the wife of the top executive of the tobacco company. When Etta falls ill with measles, Mitzy takes Maddie in, and Maddie finds herself deep in the belly of the nascent tobacco health scandals that will come. Mitzy's husband, Mr. Winston, has enlisted the town doctor and the tobacco wives to market MOMints, a menthol cigarette specifically for women. MOMints are supposed to be good for morning sickness and for slim-

ming down after pregnancy, but Maddie finds evidence to the contrary. When he is confronted with the idea that cigarettes are dangerous, Mr. Winston says, "Let's talk about *goddamn cigarettes*. Let's talk about how they paid for this table, and those chairs, about how they keep the lights on. . . . How they provide jobs for half the state of North Carolina" (298). It is hard to let go of your livelihood and your pride in it. It is hard to change a way of life. Maddie knows this through her own experience, but she, like her father, is dedicated to truth and bravery.

This story follows the struggles of so many women: Maddie, her mother, Aunt Etta, the factory workers, and the tobacco wives, all of whom are reimagining their lives after the war. They are no longer taken care of by men, and in fact, men may be putting them in danger. The town, likewise, is no longer able to rely on or trust the "town fathers."

It's easy to see in hindsight that Big Tobacco was always more concerned with profits than with health (especially women's health), but before the war and before Maddie came of age, tobacco and smoking were a given in North Carolina. The wealth and prosperity they brought fostered a sense of pride in being from a small but powerful town, full of beauty and following its own social rhythm. The community is accepting, as long as no one points out differences or disturbs the hierarchy. Aunt

Etta and Frances's friendship can remain ambiguous, the tobacco wives can keep their social positions, the women working at the factory can keep their jobs, life can stay familiar and comfortable, as long as nobody speaks out too loudly. Maddie, an outsider, a young girl without parental guidance or many friends, a girl who has to learn a skill and make her own way in the world, is the only one willing to speak truth to power and push for change, even though it is scary and potentially dangerous. What is the "right thing to do" when your whole life and the lives of the whole community will be upended by the truth?

At times, Maddie pushes the boundaries of what is expected of her, at others, she is a predictable young girl trying to please. At times, her innocence and gullibility seem inconsistent with her spunky nature, and her deep questions are too neatly tied up with simple conversations. But Maddie's story is compelling, the energy of a young girl runs through the prose, and it's easy

to be on her side in her quest to do the right thing.

Myers conjures Bright Leaf in affectionate detail, from the scent of the curing tobacco to the waves of sticky heat, to the colorful gowns, to the genteel parties that enliven the town. The women in Bright Leaf are a force to be reckoned with, but they are not without greed themselves. Myers shows how we can be complicit in greater harms because we are comfortable with a certain way of life.

To move into the future with integrity, Maddie has to embrace her independent spirit and her commitment to finding the truth. She says, "I saw the world differently now. I'd been so sure of what was right or wrong, of who was good and bad. . . . But life wasn't like that. It was far more complicated. I understood that now. And now that I knew, there was no going back" (326). North Carolina's long history with tobacco is complicated too, and Myers shows us what is gained and lost in a town's coming of age. ■



ABOVE Tobacco field, June 1962, from the *Daily Reflector Negative Collection* (#741)

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