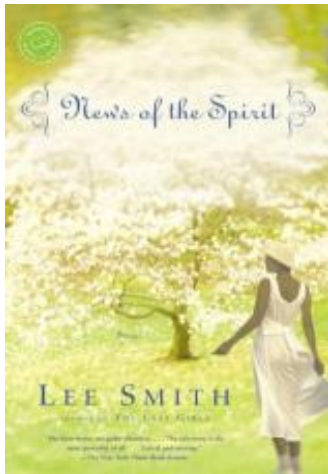


News of the Spirit

by Lee Smith



About the Book

NEWS OF THE SPIRIT is Lee Smith's latest collection of short stories. The five narratives capture the voices of women, young and old, as they try to make sense of their lives. Their success --- and lack thereof --- makes for engaging and interesting reading.

Discussion Guide

1. What themes do you think tie these stories together?
2. Which story or stories were the most powerful and had the greatest impact on you? Why?
3. One reviewer has written, "What Smith doesn't write, what she leaves in the tiny spaces between sentences, between narrative moments, is as important as what she insists our attention be turned to." What do you think the reviewer is trying to say? Do you agree with this statement? Are there instances in any of these stories that illustrate this point?
4. In each of these stories, you are offered glimpses of an array of remarkable, secondary characters. What minor characters intrigued you and made you want to hear more from them? For instance, what do you think happened to Carroll Byrd, the scandalous other woman in "Live Bottomless"?
5. Just as Charlene made up Bubba, have you ever made up a story to create the self you thought you wanted to be? Did you find Charlene's dishonesty to be troubling? How do people separate fact from fiction in the telling of their own stories?
6. Why do you think Charlene was initially so resistant to telling stories based on her own experiences? Why did she think her own life was not worth talking about and what changed her mind? How do you deal with these issues in your

own life? Are there stories you would not tell? Why is this so?

7. How did Sarah in "Blue Wedding" become so isolated? How would the story change if Gladiola were telling it? Discuss how any of the stories might change if told by a different character; for example, if Jenny's father told the story of his affair and the subsequent trip to Key West with his family or if Alice's nurse was the narrator in "The Happy Memories Club."

8. A reoccurring theme here is the complicated nature of familial relationships. Discuss the nature of these relationships and how they do or do not change in these stories. Even as adults, we still often view our families through the eyes of a child as does Jenny in "Live Bottomless." How does this blind us? How do we heal the old wounds? Can we?

9. All of these stories explore the brother-sister relationship in some manner. Why do the siblings in many of these stories become estranged? Does that make the bond less important?

10. Why do you think Jenny's father had the affair? Do you think he made the right decision to stay with his wife and daughter? How do you think the adult Jenny who narrates the story really feels about her father's decision?

11. What sets Carroll Byrd apart from the other women in town? Why does Jenny find her so fascinating?

12. Do you think Jenny ended up with the life she envisioned as a precocious thirteen-year-old? Do any of these characters end up with the lives they planned on? Do any of us?

13. What price has Chanel paid for her upward mobility? What do you think she will do with her newfound perspective on her life?

14. Where do you think Chanel will end up? Or Sarah? How do you feel about the form of the short story that often leaves the reader guessing about the remainder of a life?

15. Why were Alice's stories about her life met with such hostility in "The Happy Memories Club"? What does this story tell you about life in a retirement community? Do you think Alice feels trapped by the role she is supposed to play as a senior citizen?

16. The members of the Happy Memories Club are appalled that Alice does not talk about her long-time marriage in her stories. Why do you think she does not write about this part of her life at any length? Does it mean she didn't love her husband?

17. In **News of the Spirit**, were you surprised that Drew stayed at the party? Do you think Paula underestimated her fiancé? Do you think Paula has learned to value her eccentric family?

18. Paula and Johnny lived in their own private world as children. Paula is still trying to figure out what changed and why. How would you answer her questions?

19. Did these fictional worlds resonate with your own experiences and your own stories? Or prompt you to think about the stories of your own life? What news of your own spirit would you most want to tell others? If you had to tell just one

story about your own life, what story would it be and why?

20. Why did your group choose to read this particular book? Do you think you will go on to read other works by Lee Smith if you have not done so already?

21. How does this collection compare with other works that your group has read?

Author Bio

Lee Smith is the author of 15 novels, including FAIR AND TENDER LADIES, ORAL HISTORY, SAVING GRACE and GUESTS ON EARTH, as well as four collections of short stories, including ME AND MY BABY VIEW THE ECLIPSE and NEWS OF THE SPIRIT. Her novel THE LAST GIRLS was a *New York Times* bestseller, as well as a co-winner of the Southern Book Critics Circle Award. A retired professor of English at North Carolina State University, she has received an Academy Award in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the North Carolina Award for Literature, and the Weatherford Award for Appalachian Literature.

Critical Praise

"Smith excels at creating characters somewhat boggled by the reality of who they've become."

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