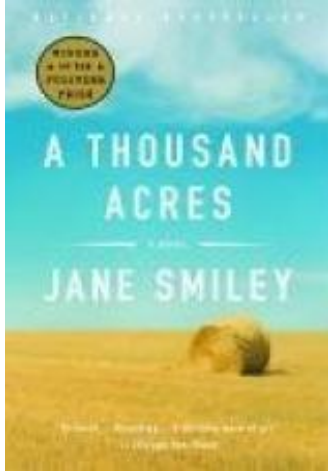


A Thousand Acres

by Jane Smiley



About the Book

A successful Iowa farmer decides to divide his farm between his three daughters. When the youngest objects, she is cut out of his will. This sets off a chain of events that brings dark truths to light and explodes long-suppressed emotions. An ambitious reimagining of Shakespeare's **King Lear** cast upon a typical American community in the late twentieth century, **A Thousand Acres** takes on themes of truth, justice, love, and pride, and reveals the beautiful yet treacherous topography of humanity.

Winner - Pulitzer Prize

Winner - National Book Critics Circle Awards

Discussion Guide

1. How does the symbiotic relationship between person and place addressed in Ms. Smiley's choice of epigraph play itself out in the novel? How does setting shape character and vice versa? Which seems to have the upper hand? How is Zebulon County itself a major character in **A Thousand Acres**?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Ginny's narration? Is she able to maintain clarity and candor throughout her chronicling of events? What gets in the way? Is she as forthcoming in portraying herself as she is in discussing others? Why or why not? How would the novel differ if told from the perspective of Rose, Caroline, Jess, or Larry?

3. At the outset of the novel, Ginny confesses that retrospection has not revealed too much about the drama that unfolded when her father decided to hand over the farm to Rose and her and leave out Caroline: "I've thought over every moment of that party time and time again, sifting for pointers, signals, ways of knowing how to do things differently from the way they got done. There were no clues" [p. 13]. To what extent does the story that she then tells undermine this claim? What remains a mystery despite her scrutiny?
4. What are the most tragic elements of **A Thousand Acres**? Which of these elements are rooted in the exercise of an individual's will, and which seem attributable to something beyond the scope of human volition? Where does the novel ultimately situate itself in the enduring fate v. free will debate?
5. What do you see as Smiley's debt to Shakespeare's **King Lear**? Where do the two works part ways? What provides **A Thousand Acres** with its autonomy despite its borrowed plot and characters?
6. Which of the issues explored in **A Thousand Acres** are unique to rural life in America? Which resonate regardless of geography? What does the novel reveal about variations and consistencies in the so-called American character?
7. What are a few of the guises in which passion appears in **A Thousand Acres**? What seems to lie at the root of each guise? Which do the most damage? Why do some characters yield to a desire for authority, acreage, etc., while others resist such temptations? Is there greater freedom in following passion or in checking it? What does the novel teach us about the nature of passion, restraint, and indulgence?
8. The interior lives of Caroline as well as Larry remain relatively unexamined compared to those of Rose and Ginny, their spouses, and Jess. What is the dramatic and thematic significance of keeping these characters in the shadows?
9. Contemplating her father's momentous decision, Ginny marvels at its apparent rashness. "He decided to change his whole life on Wednesday!" she exclaims. "Objectively, this is an absurdity" [p. 34]. Her remark points to the struggle against the whims of chance that appears throughout **A Thousand Acres**. How does the deliberate adherence to daily routine help the characters to weather the vicissitudes of the natural world and the inconsistency of human nature? What kind of solace and safety, if any, do seasonal chores and rituals provide?
10. Discuss the myriad ways that motherhood?and fatherhood?are weighed in the novel. How does Ginny's ineluctable desire to give birth shape her view of her present and past? What meaning does she derive from the many surrogate-maternal roles she plays? In what ways is her mother's long absence a constant presence?
11. "Our bond had a peculiar fertility that I was wise enough to appreciate, and also, perhaps, wise enough to appreciate in silence," Ginny says. "Rose wouldn't have stood for any sentimentality" [p. 62]. Reticence seems the norm among these characters, yet they express themselves in other ways. What nonverbal forms of communication do they use? What are the reach and limits of each? What are the perils and possibilities?
12. Is there a particular political view or ideology at work in **A Thousand Acres**? If so, what is it? Does viewing the novel through the lens of feminism, for example, limit or enlarge it? What do you see as the novelist's responsibility vis-a-vis politics? Does this work fall closer to agenda or inquiry?
13. "The first novel I ever knew was my family," writes Ms. Smiley in the afterword to **Family: American Writers Remember Their Own**

(David McKay Co., 1997). "We had every necessary element, from the wealth of incident both domestic and historical, to the large cast of characters. We had geographical sweep and the requisite, for an American novel, adventure in the West." How can **A Thousand Acres** be interpreted as a meditation on family? How does the novel shed light on the dark corners of family life? How are the Cooks both anomalous to and representative of the average American family? What explains their tragic dissolution? What could have prevented it?

14. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a story that is told almost entirely in the past tense? How does this affect your interpretation of the novel?

15. Ginny is stilled by the disturbing thought that her own "endurance might be a pleasant fiction allowed [her] by others who've really faced facts" [p. 90]. Is it? Do you construe her story, i.e., the novel, as flight from a difficult reality or a means of confronting it? Why?

16. During a game of Monopoly, Jess describes Harold as someone who is "cannier and smarter than he lets on," then suggests that real freedom exists in "the slippage between what he looks like and what he is" [p. 109]. How does the relationship between appearance and reality drive the novel's action in terms of the meaning and direction of its characters' lives? What kind of importance does Jane Smiley assign to this relationship?

17. In what reads like a muted epiphany, Ginny considers the constant weight and exhaustion she felt in the months after her mother's death and then realizes that one reaches a point where "relief is good enough" [p. 198]. Is this remark an expression of resignation or true acceptance?

18. In a candid conversation with Rose, Ginny voices her inability to understand her father's abuse despite Rose's insistence that the matter is a simple case of "I want, I take, I do." Ginny says, "I can't believe it's that simple," to which Rose responds: "If you probe and probe and try to understand, it just holds you back" [p. 212]. What does this exchange reveal about the limitations of reason? About the possibility or impossibility of true catharsis? What options exist when the rational is exhausted?

Author Bio

Jane Smiley is the author of numerous novels, including *A THOUSAND ACRES*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and, most recently, *The Last Hundred Years Trilogy: SOME LUCK, EARLY WARNING and GOLDEN AGE*. She is also the author of several works of nonfiction and books for young adults. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she has also received the PEN Center USA Lifetime Achievement Award for Literature. She lives in Northern California.

Critical Praise

"A full, commanding novel. . . . A story bound and tethered to a lonely road in the Midwest, but drawn from a universal source. . . . Profoundly American."

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