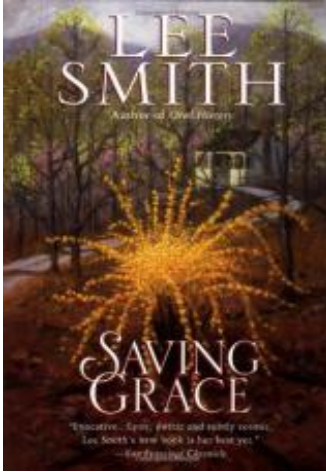


# Saving Grace

by Lee Smith

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## About the Book

"LUCID IN EXECUTION, BREATHTAKING IN SCOPE AND HEART-RENDING IN EFFECT--A REDEMPTIVE WORK OF ART. . . . Lee Smith has done more than write another novel about the South. She has broken through the grotesque surface to the underground spring, the music of Scrabble Creek, and the effect is stunning--a beguiling, gentle prose formed by an honesty so severe we are brought to our knees. . . . This novel has a grand and singular purpose, to clothe the spirit with flesh. In this, Lee Smith succeeds."

*?The Washington Post Book World*

## Discussion Guide

1. What is your first impression of Florida Grace Shepherd at the beginning of **Saving Grace**? Why is the choice of a first person narrative effective in establishing the feel of the book? What tone does Grace use in reflecting on her earliest memories? What does she seem to love the most about her time at Scrabble Creek?
2. How does Fannie, Grace's mother, represent the core of the family unit? In which ways does Grace think her mother, not her father, is a "saint"? How did marrying Virgil represent a sharp departure in Fannie's life, and in which ways did it change her?
3. How does Grace's attitude about her mother contrast with her feelings about her father, Virgil? What about him scares her? What view do others have about him?
4. Grace recalls, "Daddy was the master of the house, and Mama was often like one of the kids." How is this

demonstrated? How do the Shepherds behave toward one another? How does this interaction affect Grace's later attitude toward relationships?

**5.** What aspects of his personality make Virgil such a charismatic and successful preacher? Why is his ability to handle serpents particularly impressive to her father's followers? Why do you think Grace refuses to "be anointed"? Why do you think others, like her sister Evelyn, are?

**6.** "He does everything too much," says Evelyn of her father. What are some examples of this behavior? Do any of his children, including Grace, share this trait? How do they exhibit it?

**7.** How do Virgil's children adapt to the way of life he forces upon them? Who chafes under his rules and restrictions, and who adapts to them? How does Joe Allen remain loyal to his family but depart from his father's ways? What varied approaches do Evelyn, Grace, Billie Jean and Troy Lee take?

**8.** Why does Grace have a difficult time in school, and in which ways does she set out to reinvent herself in the seventh grade? Why do she and Marie Royal gravitate toward one another? How do the Royals treat Grace? Why doesn't she tell them the truth about her father and her family? What spurs the end of her friendship with Marie; in your opinion, why does this occur?

**9.** The names of the families in this story—Shepherd, Duty, Word, Royal—are chosen with care. How does Lee Smith infuse these names with significance? Why? What other names—for example, Grace's name and those of her children—are significant?

**10.** Grace states that she has the "gift of discernment." What does this ability lead her to discover that others might not? How does it come to her aid, and in which ways does it cause difficulties for her? Does she view it as a blessing or a curse?

**11.** Upon Lamar's arrival at the Shepherd's home, he immediately takes Grace (and Billie Jean) into his confidence. Why doesn't Grace ever confess that he's Virgil's son? What about Lamar so intoxicates Grace? How does he take advantage of that infatuation?

**12.** Grace's mother begins to waste away and characterizes it as a weak spirit: "God is testing me," she maintains. Why does she feel this way? Do you think that she became involved with Lamar; why or why not? Why, ultimately, would she take her life, especially if it were considered a mortal sin?

**13.** What is the meaning of Grace's dream the night of Homecoming? How is it a harbinger of the events to unfold? What meanings do "The bite is coming," have, both figuratively and literally?

**14.** Why does Grace blame Lamar for her mother's death? Why does Lamar place blame at the feet of Virgil? Do you believe that Lamar ever truly found God? How do you reconcile the good in him with the bad?

**15.** What about Virgil is so intoxicating to his congregants and to new people he meets? What about him would appeal to women? Why does Grace leave with him to find a new congregation, even when she could stay behind with Ruth, Carlton and Billie?

**16.** How does Grace feel about her siblings? Does she take a more maternal than a sisterly role toward some of them? How? Later in life, why do you think that Grace allows herself to become estranged from her family, even Billie Jean?

**17.** Why does Virgil take up with Carlean and abandon Grace? How is this behavior antithetical to what he preaches? What is Grace's reaction to his betrayal?

**18.** How does Grace's perception of her father change over the years? What are the early indications that he struggles between his religious fervor and his bodily weaknesses? How is he different from other religious figures that Grace encounters, most notably Travis Word?

**19.** How does Grace change after meeting Travis and becoming his wife? How does the structure of his family situation set up obstacles to their relationship? How does his commitment to his congregation put a strain on their marriage? What other challenges does the couple face?

**20.** By marrying Travis, Grace becomes the wife of a preacher like her mother before her. In which ways are each of them happy being preacher's wives, and how do they bristle under their restrictions? How does Grace take the opposite path from her mother in her journey of relationships?

**21.** Grace is a happily married woman with two children, yet she feels as though her happiness has been attained "under false pretenses." Why does she feel this way? How does she struggle with religion during that time, and how is this struggle an outgrowth of her past? What spiritual epiphanies do Grace have, both early and later in life?

**22.** Grace says, "Travis's problem was progress." In which ways is this assessment correct? How, ultimately, does it doom their marriage?

**23.** How does the death of their stillborn son change the relationship between Grace and Travis, and represent a turning point within the marriage? How is Travis, like her father, the ruler of the household and all who reside within it?

**24.** After her first meeting with Randy Newhouse at a motel, Grace says, "I thought I had been born again." What does Grace mean by this statement, and how is it ironic? Why does she embark upon an affair with him? After she's caught, what emotions does she display? Do you think that Grace preferred living with Randy to being married to Travis? Why or why not?

**25.** How is Grace's style of motherhood similar to and different from the parenting philosophies of her parents? How does her devotion to her children change after she meets Randy? Ultimately, in which ways are the girls similar to Grace?

**26.** After her involvement with Randy, how does Grace become more integrated with the world around her? What good and bad habits does she adopt, and why? Does Randy approve or disapprove of this change in her? At first, why is she so desperate to reconcile with Randy after he leaves her?

27. Grace reinvents herself at different points during her life to fit with her circumstances. To what do you attribute this adaptability? Which aspects of her personality are constant and unchanging?

28. After leaving Randy and driving to visit the Dutys, Grace says, "I felt suddenly, completely *alive* in a new way, a way that made me realize I had only been walking through my life." What are some examples of Grace's previous ambivalence toward running her own life? What spurs her to take charge of her existence?

29. At the end of the story, Grace departs to her childhood home at Scrabble Creek. What happens there that changes her? Does Grace welcome this? Why?

30. After reading the book, how do you interpret its title, **Saving Grace**? How does it work on a literal and a figurative level? Do you think that Grace has truly been "saved"?and if so, from what?

## 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

"Ms. Smith possesses a fine talent for creating narrative voices, whether the ungrammatical eloquence of a hill-country healer or the educated affectations of a Richmond gentleman."

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