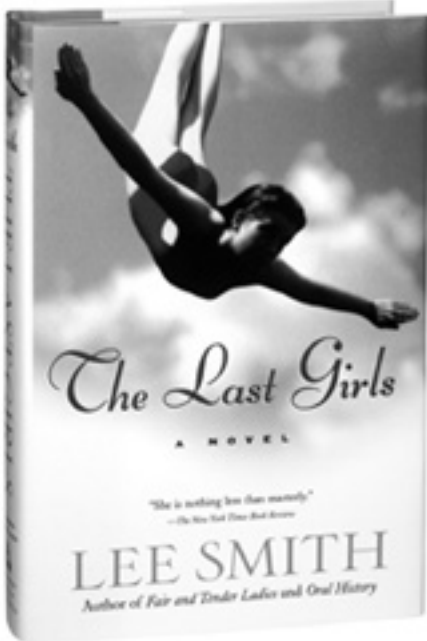


## THE LAST GIRLS, a novel by LEE SMITH



- A *New York Times* Bestseller
- A *Book Sense* National Bestseller
- A *Good Morning America* Book Club Selection

**O**n a beautiful June day in 1965, a dozen girls, classmates at a women's college in Virginia, launched their homemade raft (inspired by Huck Finn's) on a trip down the Mississippi to New Orleans. Thirty-five years later, four of the "girls" reunite to cruise the river one more time and to honor the memory of a fifth classmate whose death has left them looking for answers. As they retrace their trip down the river—this time on *The Belle of Natchez* luxury steamboat—they recount the paths they've taken to arrive at this point in their lives and reconsider the girls they were and the women they've become.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. To write *The Last Girls*, Lee Smith revisited a 1966 Mississippi River rafting adventure she shared with some Hollins College classmates. She could have written a nonfiction memoir, but chose instead to use the material fictionally. What advantages did that give her?
2. There are five main characters in the novel—Harriet Holding, Courtney Gray, Catherine Wilson, Anna Todd, and Baby Ballou, whose ashes the grown up girls commit to the river at New Orleans. Baby's influences on them and on this story are profound. Would you characterize those influences as negative or positive—or both? Why?
3. Harriet, Baby's roommate and, in some ways, her disciple, has hung onto Baby's secrets and betrayals all her life. What effects have those burdensome legacies had on Harriet's life choices?
4. Courtney is a character who has made many compromises in order to obtain and maintain a life that was the ideal for Southern college girls in the fifties and sixties. What have those compromises brought about for her thirty years later? Is there anything more to Courtney than materialism and an obsession with propriety?
5. Catherine, the only daughter of privilege besides Baby, has been less driven by status and money. As her Southern belle mother comments on page 197, "I always knew you'd be the death of me." What have been Catherine's motivations and how successful has she been at what she's chosen—or what has chosen her?
6. Anna's life at late middle age is probably the farthest from the expectations of Southern college girls of the mid twentieth century. As she muses on page 276, ". . . nothing was ever like it was supposed to be, except in [her] books, where *everything* was." What functions do romance novels serve for a reader? How do you respond to Anna's ulterior motives in regard to the cabin boy she thinks of as "Huckleberry"?
7. What about the men—the husbands and lovers—in this novel? Could Anna make a reasonable

romantic hero from composite parts of Jeff, Hawk, Gene, Charlie, Pete, Kenneth, Lou, and Russell? What attribute of the romantic hero can you find in each one?

8. There's one unsolved mystery in *The Last Girls*. Was Baby's death truly an accident or was it suicide? There are clues. One is Baby's poem, "The Trip to France," on page 291. Does it make you lean one way or the other?
9. Lee Smith has characterized *The Last Girls* as "a serious book in disguise." What are the "serious" themes of the book? How would you say they are disguised?
10. Lee Smith has also said, "For me—and for most of us on the real raft, I suspect—it was the only journey that ended as it was supposed to. Subsequent trips have been harder, scarier. We have been shipwrecked, we have foundered on hidden shoals, we have lost our running lights. . . . I can't stick to a traditional plot anymore. Such a plot is more suited to boys' books anyway." Do you agree with her that linear plots—beginning, middle, end—are not the plots of most women's lives? What has determined—or shaped—your life?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SUSAN WOOLLEY RAINES

Lee Smith is the author of many previous novels, including *Fair and Tender Ladies* and *The Christmas Letters*, and the collections of stories *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse* and *News of the Spirit*, both *New York Times* Notable Books. Her many awards include the Lila Wallace–Reader's Digest Writer's Award, and the 1999 Academy Award for fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She grew up in Grundy, Virginia, graduated from Hollins College, and now lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina.

## *The Last Girls*

a novel by Lee Smith

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## FROM THE REVIEWS

"Lee Smith has that talent that all storytellers envy: the ability to dive deeply into the lives of her characters, to bring them to life in their rich fullness, warts and all. Each of these women could energize an entire book. Each brings something unique and captivating to a superb tale that will stay with you long after the reading is done." —*The Boston Globe*

"An honest portrait of intelligent, well-rounded Southerners is always refreshing, and *The Last Girls* delivers. . . . Smith proves she has a voice all her own." —*USA Today*

"With a verve and style seldom seen today, she does what Melville and Twain couldn't have imagined and weaves a tale of the same women on two voyages down the Mississippi on two kinds of craft—thirty-five years apart." —*The Denver Post*

"Engrossing . . . a compelling novel about the ebb and flow of real life." —*Seattle-Post Intelligencer*

"Nobody understands the subtler virtues of men and women and careful compromises of love as well as Smith does; this book should win her an even wider readership." —*O, The Oprah Magazine*