

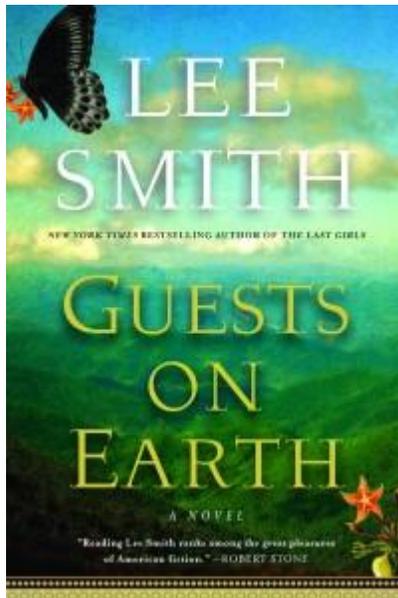
Book Review: *Guests on Earth* by Lee Smith



Welcome Guests

Lee Smith of Hillsborough is a preeminent Southern author. Her latest novel, *Guests on Earth*, captivates, enthralls, shocks, and draws vivid pictures of Western North Carolina as the backdrop of an unusual setting: Highland Hospital in Asheville.

The hospital, still in operation today, is the centerpiece of the novel, a place to which Evalina Toussaint, the charming but self-effacing narrator, and Zelda Fitzgerald, fascinating wife of author F. Scott Fitzgerald, return as a matter of home.



In 1936, 13-year-old Evalina, a piano phenomenon and the orphan of a New Orleans “fancy woman,” is brought to Highland by her mother’s married lover. There she is readjusted into having a useful and fulfilling life. Never mind that Highland is a mental institution; Dr. Carroll’s method of treatment includes art, nature, music, exercise and keeping busy, along with insulin and electroshock therapies for the severe cases.

Dr. and Mrs. Carroll, also real characters, sweep Evalina off her feet with their attention and kindness, becoming the parents she never had. Her stay at Highland is therapeutic, breathing life into the pale sadness that enveloped her upon her arrival and, with genuine happiness, she recognizes the sane among the insane and the vague line that separates them.

Often Evalina tells the stories of other women whose paths join with hers even if it is briefly. Each woman who is a guest – never a patient – at Highland illustrates the plight of women who are too much for the men who love them: too privileged, too smart, too original. Zelda, one of the first guests she meets, shows her how talented, beautiful women can become victims of their own ambition and brains in the contemporary man’s world. Dixie, a Southern belle who has too much life and not enough maternal instincts, teaches her how to live. Jinx Feeney, a troubled teen who underwent “therapeutic sterilization performed for the public good” easily blurs the lines between fact and fiction as a coping mechanism.

It is Highland Hospital’s fire of 1948 in which nine female patients perished – Zelda included – that begins and ends the tale with a gasp and an exhale, a sigh of mourning, and a suggestion of the still-unsolved tragedy’s cause. And it is with respect and love that Lee Smith so brilliantly wrote this novel about a place where her own father and later her own son spent time dealing with mental illness. It is a curiosity, a statement, a love letter tied with a shiny but nearly frayed ribbon, holding the history and the memories together in one story.

Smith's eloquent writing, words so delicately chosen, scenes so masterfully paced, reflects Evalina's fully-lived life while examining the nuances and surprises of living in the present, as the story's guests do each day.

"Perhaps any life is such," Evalina muses after hearing Jinx tell her story against that of the police who brought her to Highland, "different stories like different strands, each distinct in itself, each true, yet wound together to form one rope, one life."

And perhaps that is the key to all understanding. – *Jeanne E. Fredriksen*

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<http://leesmith.com>. This review appeared in *The Rolesville Buzz* newspaper.