

MARI KLOEPPPEL

Cobahsaan and Blue I, 2007
Oil on linen, 60 x 42 in.



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

CATHERINE SEGURSON

Perestroika in Paris

An interview with
novelist Jane Smiley

Jane Smiley has published sixteen novels in a variety of styles including an epic novel written in medieval language, a college satire, a modernization of Shakespeare, and a murder mystery, to name a few. In 1992, Smiley won the Pulitzer Prize for *A Thousand Acres*, her reworking of *King Lear* set in the Midwest. Her most recent novels make up the *Last Hundred Years* trilogy, with each chapter representing a year in the life of a Midwestern farming family beginning in 1920 and ending in 2019, giving readers a century of American life as seen through the casual day-to-day interactions of everyday farmers and their descendants. In addition to her fiction, Smiley has written an analysis of writing craft, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel*, where she not only advises modern writers on the writing process, but also deconstructs one hundred novels she has read for their contributions to the canon. She also wrote the short biographies of Charles Dickens and the physicist John Vincent Atanasoff, and is the author of the *Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series of five books for young adults, the *Ellen and Ned* series for younger readers, related to the *Oak Valley Ranch* series but for younger readers, as well as horse-centric memoir *A Year at the Races*.

In Smiley's latest book *Perestroika in Paris*, the novel has nothing to do with the economic policies of Gorbachev's Soviet Union. In this book "Perestroika" is the name of a horse who takes us along on her adventures in Paris and makes friends with a variety of other animals and humans along the way. Smiley writes mainly from the animal's perspectives. Besides *Perestroika* there is a dog named Frida, a raven named Raoul; a mallard couple named Sid and Nancy; and a father and son rat duo named Conrad and Kurt. Along the way these animal characters of different species make friends with each other and build a community between themselves and a few kindly humans.

The novel gets going when Paras's curiosity prompts her to nudge an unlocked stall door and wander off. Her explorations land her in a park within sight of the Eiffel Tower, where Frida takes the horse under her wing, so to speak. From there the story and the animals roam free in the area of the *Champs de Mars* in Paris, figuring out how to get shopkeepers and residents to indulge them.

Jane Smiley is herself a horse person and draws on her own experiences as deep inspiration for her writing. She displays a powerful empathy with animals and our relationships with them in her new book.

CATHERINE SEGURSON: Since you gave a talk at our virtual conference this summer, I've really been enjoying reading several of your books.

JANE SMILEY: Let me ask you, have you read *The Greenlanders*?

CS: Yes, I like the archaic voice that you use. That was amazing. I was so surprised. The book I've been working on of my own is historical fiction. So I'm always interested in how other people do it and I have a section set in the 1500s, Renaissance, Italy. But I use a modernish voice. I don't try to sound like then. But the way you used the archaic language was so impressive.

JS: Writing *The Greenlanders* was a real treat. That's possibly my favorite novel I've written. It just was such a different experience from the others.

CS: In December 2020, you came out with a new novel *Perestroika in Paris*, a magical book about a racehorse who escapes the track, wanders into the Champ de Mars in Paris, and becomes part of a found family of animals and humans. The animals divulge their thoughts and feelings to us as they go on adventures. Did you get to spend time in Paris to research their travels?

JS: Oh yes, absolutely.

CS: And then did you draw upon your own experiences with owning horses to create the main character, the horse named *Perestroika*? You seem to be able to get into the mind of a horse perfectly. And how did you come up with the other animal characters?

JS: The dog and the horse are both based on my own horse and my own dog. What I usually say about the horse thing is that you have to be aware of your horse's feelings and opinions and fears and pleasures in order to be able to ride safely. So it wasn't hard to get into the mind of the horse. Our dog was very beautiful and very graceful and also a good hunting dog. But every time she was lying on her chair, she looked like she was in the state of despair. The dog and the horse weren't hard to get into.

For the other animals, I did look some things up about ravens, especially, and also about rats and mallards. But mostly I just sort of made it up because I needed them to fill out the psychological or sociological animal picture. So I tried to stick with what was likely, but I also wanted to fill in other stuff like the rat, especially the rat. I had to make him an interesting character and give him some adventures.

CS: I believe this is your sixteenth novel for adults. How do you compare the process of creating this novel with some of the other novels you've written before?

JS: Well, each one has been different, I have to say. In some ways this novel was the most fun because I enjoyed being in the minds of the animals. And I also enjoyed sort of in person and also virtually wandering around Paris and imagining what it would be like there. I did not know when it would be published or if it would be published. I just did it because I enjoyed it. And then about a year and a half ago now, I said to my publisher, "I think that the election of 2020 might be a good time to publish this just because it might be a relief from whatever's going on." We didn't know that COVID would come too and make everything even worse. But they thought it was a good idea, and the editor made some really good suggestions and that's what happened.

CS: I think that you were right. That's how I felt when I was reading it, too. It was like a relief to be in a slow-moving, magical book that I could look forward to after the news of the day. I especially enjoyed the personality of the dog, Frida, and it was comforting to go along on her journey to ultimately find peace and happiness.

JS: Let me say something about Frida. I had one of my horses, not *Perestroika*, but another horse, at the Pebble Beach Horse Show. A woman, I think it was a trainer or else it was a woman who was an active horse show person, she came walking along with this German shorthair. And she told me that the dog needed a home. The reason that she needed a new home was that her owner had left her alone for a while and she had torn up some of the furniture. I don't know if that was true. But at any rate,

I was just sitting there and she was such a beautiful dog. I said, "I'll take her." I knew that my husband was not in the mood for another dog, especially a large dog. On the way home with Frida, I called a friend of mine who had German shorthaired pointers, a pair of them. And I said, "Meet me at my house. I have a new dog, and I want you to be there to talk Jack into allowing this dog into the house." So at that point, Frida was only a year and a half old. When I arrived home I let the dog jump out of the car with me. My husband scowled. And then my friend drove up the driveway at the same moment and said, "Oh, what a beautiful dog. Wow. She's a really beautiful dog." So my husband had to be quiet about it while my friend was there. My husband loves to go to the beach, but I don't; I'm too clumsy to go to the beach. And I said to him, "She can be your beach companion." So that's how Frida won him over, because she loved to go to the beach, she loved to dig holes in the sand, find stones and put them in the holes, and she loved to jump into the surf.

CS: So, you owned a German shorthair yourself, and she was also named Frida?

JS: Yes. That's right.

CS: In the book, Frida starts out as sort of a sad dog. She's been with a homeless busker musician, who passed away, and so she's sad, but it seems like in the end she finds happiness. That's similar to your own story of rescuing Frida.

JS: Yes. I don't know that my Frida was unhappy with her previous owner or anything like that, but she did have this sad look on her face fairly frequently. My favorite picture of my Frida is when she had been with us for about a year and a half, and she came to the top of the stairs with every single dog toy in her mouth, just this giant bunch of dog toys. I don't know if she was claiming them. I don't know if she was showing them to me, but it was such a Frida-ish thing to do, to take all the dog toys and get them in her mouth and keep them there.

CS: That also seems like something the Frida in the book might do too. In the book she keeps all the other animals together kind of, and she's the one with the street smarts.

JS: I would say so. Yes.

CS: I was wondering if you could also talk about the human characters in your novel. They can't speak to the animals, but they seem to understand them. So were any of these based on real people? And I was wondering if, since you wrote a biography of Charles Dickens, might some of these characters be inspired by his characters?

JS: His characters would be way too crazy for this. But I knew there had to be humans in it for practical reasons. And so, as I thought up what the practical reasons might be, then I came up with some likely human to fulfill that purpose. And then, I quite got to liking the humans that I'd constructed. And as you may know, the vegetable producer or provider, the guy who has the vegetable market, his name is Jerome. And the guy who owns the market in Carmel Valley Village is also named Jerome. It's a kind of homage to my favorite produce store.

CS: Oh, that's wonderful. Does he know about it?

JS: I don't know. He's quite modest. I might've told him at some point. But anyway, the other humans just happened. And then, because they were necessary, I just developed their relationships with one another and with the dog. The boy, he's kind of based on an idea from long ago of boys who have to make it on their own, but I didn't want him to be an orphan. So instead of giving him parents or even grandparents who would be more observant of what he's doing, I gave him this very, very old great-grandmother and then she got to be interesting to think about too. So all the characters eventually developed in my mind on their own.

CS: I enjoyed the human characters, just as much as the animals, in the book. They all had their quirks and charm about them. And then I was wondering if your novel *Horse Heaven*, which is about the world of American horse racing, if that might've inspired you to get to know the inner life of horses and then eventually write from the horse's perspective.

JS: Well, I started breeding Thoroughbreds after I bought a Thoroughbred and had him here with me in Carmel

Valley. I just thought he was a totally fascinating guy and he'd had fifty-two starts and had won a fair amount of money. And in those days, you couldn't just look them up online and see where they came from. You had to research it. So when I discovered that he had been bred and born in Germany and then raised in France, then imported to the United States and raced on the East Coast and on the West Coast, I thought, wow, this is a totally sophisticated horse. And he was a wonderful horse to ride. So that inspired me to try breeding a few horses of my own. Then I got interested in what they were like as foals and then how they developed. And since they were mostly related to one another, I was interested in how similar they were to one another, but also what some of the differences between them were. I did not succeed as a racehorse owner or breeder, but I really, really enjoyed having horses and riding them and learning about them. And all of that was taking place around the time that I was writing *Horse Heaven*. I also wrote *A Year at the Races*. I just continued to have a lot of interest in horses and their differences with one another and nature and nurture, and maybe what their points of view are. So the books are connected, but they're not exactly related. I will say that the inspiration for this book, which took place in 2009, partly came from visiting an American woman racehorse trainer who lives in France. After I had visited where she had her horses—it was an old estate that was very beautiful with all these paths through the woods and so the horses got to do different things every day—I was eating my French onion soup in the Place du Trocadéro on the west side of the Seine. And I was looking around and noticing how different that area seemed to be from the more famous areas. And I thought, *Oh, I wonder what it'd be like if* . . . and then I thought about a horse escaping and I knew that she had to go to the Place du Trocadéro because it's such a beautiful and interesting spot. So, that's how it got started. Then it just developed bit by bit.

CS: You actually were in Paris looking at horses when you got the inspiration for *Perestroika in Paris*?

JS: Yes. I wasn't looking to buy a horse or anything. I was just visiting this woman in Paris who was a really interesting horse trainer.

CS: And so you first started writing the book in 2009 then?

JS: Yes.

CS: And so you just worked on it off and on? Because you were writing the Last Hundred Years trilogy.

JS: That's what I was doing then, yes.

CS: It is enchanting that the human characters are very accepting of the animals and they tend to go along with things, and also different animals of different stripes come together. So I was just wondering if you wanted to encourage your readers to be more accepting in their relationships to animals. Is it a comment about acceptance and diversity?

JS: Not consciously. Most of the people that I know and respect as animal trainers and riders are very accepting and loving of different kinds of animals, so I don't view that as an unusual trait. In the book I think they all have their different reasons for loving animals. The guy who is the caretaker in the Champs de Mars, his reason for acceptance of the horse roaming around there is just why not? This is a place where the French cavalry drilled back in the day. And so there's this kind of pleasure about a horse being in this place. But that's why I set it in November and December and the winter, because it'd be much harder if there were more daylight for Paras to remain a secret.

CS: Paras the horse?

JS: Paras the horse. The other animals, well the rats, live alone in this giant house and they have plenty of food to eat, so they don't have to do anything bad. They're highly indulged. The raven has plenty of opinions, but he's not endangered like the mallards are. But the mallards can't be shot in Paris anyway. So, it doesn't seem odd to me that animals would get along and it doesn't seem odd to me that the people get along. What seems odd to me is when people don't get along. I think that's the weird thing. I mean, I live in Carmel Valley and I've lived here for over twenty years. And my experience on the Monterey

peninsula is that people get along. I remember they did that show, I think it was called *Big Little Lies*. I watched an episode and I'd had kids in high school and junior high school and elementary school in Carmel and in Carmel Valley. I watched that show and turned it off. I said people aren't like that around here. I don't believe it. I do not believe this show. And I'm actually incredibly angry that they set it in this place. Where it says negative things about a very positive area.

CS: So that gets me to our next question. You're often thought of as a midwestern writer and many of your books give a kind of mythical iconography to the Midwest. But in some of your novels you explore California settings and characters, such as your book *Private Life*, set in the San Francisco Bay area. And also some of the characters of the *Last Hundred Years* trilogy that are descendants of your midwestern farming family ended up moving out to California. So do you want to talk about your inspiration for frequently using California settings and Californians as your characters?

JS: Also don't forget the young adult horse books. Those are based all over the Monterey peninsula, actually. Some more around Salinas, and one of the families lives in Pacific Grove.

CS: Ah, okay. I haven't read those. So I didn't know that, but that's interesting.

JS: They were lots of fun to write. I really enjoyed those. I grew up in Saint Louis, which doesn't consider itself the Midwest. They consider themselves the most western part of the East Coast.

CS: The gateway to the West, right?

JS: The gateway, but not actually in the Midwest. One of the things I noticed when I lived in the Midwest, especially in Iowa, was that those states that are considered to be the Midwest and similar to one another are actually quite dissimilar. Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Wisconsin, Minnesota, they're not like one another at all. That's what intrigued me to write about those areas.

I lived there, so I wanted to write about what I saw around me. And when I was writing *A Thousand Acres*, what I saw around me was the consolidation of farming and the rising use of pesticides. And some very scary ways in which the Iowa landscape was being contaminated.

Yet I quite enjoyed living in Iowa City and Ames a lot, and I thought the places I wrote about in the Midwest were interesting places. I think it's natural to most writers to look around and see what's going on, and choose a setting and place they find interesting. Let's say I learned that from Dickens. Dickens wasn't much of a good sleeper, and so he would spend his nights wandering around, just walking around London, and he had a great ear. He would overhear all the different ways that the people were talking, and he would listen for both class distinctions and geographical distinctions. He was the first English novelist to make use of all those differences in English society and lay them on the page in terms of how differently people talked, what they did, and what they said. And he just got it from walking around. Yes, he grew up in London, and he had a lot of trials as a boy. But he was also a good explorer of all kinds of different things. So maybe I can say that helped inspire me to pay attention to differences in dialogue within different settings in my own work. I don't have the kind of ear he did, but then we don't have the more extreme differences in dialects that they had in the nineteenth century in London.

CS: And then you moved out to California twenty years ago.

JS: Oh, it's been now about twenty-four.

CS: When you moved here, that's when you started to explore the West Coast settings in your novels?

JS: I would say so. I was born in LA, but we moved away from LA when I was about a year old, so I don't have any memory of that. But when I first came to the West Coast twenty-four years ago, the thing I noticed about the Monterey peninsula from the beginning was that each town was quite different from the other towns, and each town had individual histories, each town had individual landscapes, each town had individual architecture. And I thought that was really fascinating. I thought the great

thing about the Monterey peninsula is that you can go on a little tour of all kinds of places in history, and you don't even get that far away from home. The wildlands are in Big Sur, the fancy places are in Carmel, and the cowboys are all in and out of Carmel Valley. It's just one interesting spot after another.

CS: You also used San Francisco as a setting for your book *Private Life*?

JS: Yes, in *Private Life* I used both Vallejo and San Francisco.

CS: One final question: Would you talk a little about the craft of writing? You wrote the wonderful book on writing called *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel*. And in that book you say that “the novel is the only imaginative form that must have both action and point of view, suspense, and reflection. In this it seems to mimic the way life feels.” I wonder, you being such a prolific writer, what keeps you going and able to keep tapping into so many different cultures and characters.

JS: Well, I'll say two things about that. One is that I get interested in a certain subject just out of curiosity, and how I've gotten interested in the subject of every single novel has been different. But I was a curious kid, and I love reading books. One of the reasons I loved reading books when I was a kid was because I was curious. So that's one thing. The other thing is that once you get into writing a book, it's like a puzzle that you want to solve. Some books are easy to solve, and some are hard to solve. Some take a long time, and some don't take such a long time. But I love puzzles, and I love trying to figure out how things work to make whatever it is come together. And so when I teach—I teach at the University of California, Riverside—I try to get my students to see their work as whatever they want to see it as, but also as some kind of a puzzle that they can solve and that they can enjoy solving.

Jane Smiley is the author of numerous novels, including *A Thousand Acres* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and, most recently, *Perestroika in Paris* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2020) and the Last Hundred Years trilogy: *Some Luck* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), *Early Warning* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), and *Golden Age* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2015). 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.

Catherine Segurson is the founding editor of *Catamaran*. Her writing has also appeared in *Coastal Living* and elsewhere.

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Cobahsaan and Schekinah, 2019
Chalk pastel and charcoal on paper, 84 x 60 in.



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