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Book Review - 'I Have Been So Many People': A Study of Lee Smith's Fiction

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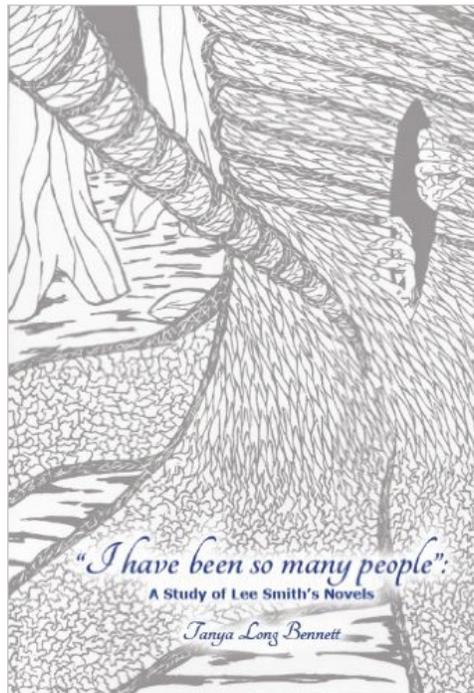
'I Have Been So Many People:' A Study of Lee Smith's Fiction by Tanya Long Bennett
(University Press of North Georgia, 2014: ISBN 978-1-9407-7107-6, \$29.95)

'*I Have Been So Many People*' by Tanya Long Bennett is a work of literary criticism that explores the work of Lee Smith in the context of Southern literature. Smith is generally considered part of the "grit lit" genre of the 1970s and 1980s, a genre defined by its usage of popular Southern culture and postmodern themes that distanced it from the earlier ideals of the Southern Renaissance. This burgeoning of postmodernity in the South is where Bennett situates her monograph.

Throughout the text, Bennett relies on a poststructuralist framework, particularly Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism, to explain Smith's preoccupation with what "ought" to be and what "is" in the world. Bennett claims Smith's use of characters searching for identity is not meant to be symbolic but indicative of a new South where personal identity is not stable and may never be found.

Over the next few chapters, Bennett looks at various novels by Smith, including *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, *Something in the Wind*, *Fancy Strut* in chapter one; *Black Mountain Breakdown* in chapter two; *Oral History* in chapter three; *Family Linen* in chapter four; *Fair and Tender Ladies* in chapter five; *The*

Devil's Dream in chapter six; *Saving Grace* in chapter seven; *The Last Girls* in chapter eight; and finally *On Agate Hill* in chapter nine. For each novel, Bennett explores how Smith employs the use of Southern, and in some cases more specifically Appalachian, characters as a means to destabilize cultural myths of a defining and stable identity.



For example, in her discussion of *Oral History*, the story of the Appalachian Cantrell family and their family curse, Bennett posits that the idea of a history that defines us does not exist as fact. It is only an idealized myth of what we desire ourselves to be. In the novel, Bennett sees this in Jennifer's folk history project. Although many voices build up a mythologized family history, they do not come close to capturing the past the reader knows to be true and thus provide an unstable basis for constructing identity.

Fans and scholars of Lee Smith, Southern literature, and post-structuralism, will find Bennett's analysis an interesting interpretation of themes in Smith's novels and Southern literature in general. This book is recommended for academic libraries that want to build or add to a collection in Southern literature, Appalachian literature, or women's literature.

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