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Book Review - A Lillian Smith Reader

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Off the SHELF

A Lillian Smith Reader edited by Margaret Rose Gladney and Lisa Hodgens (University of Georgia Press, 2016: ISBN 9780820349992, paperback, \$29.95; 9780820349985, hardcover, \$84.95)

Often those with a progressive bent view the past with derision as they reflect on how backward “those people” were. Occasionally, however, something comes along that complicates and expands our notions of who people in the past really were. In *A Lillian Smith Reader*, editors Margaret Rose Gladney and Lisa Hodgens illuminate the life and writings of a woman dedicated to social justice issues in the Deep South at a time when it was neither popular nor safe. Lillian Smith is a unique figure in 20th century Southern cultural life. This collection of her work highlights her commitment to, obsession with, and hope for a New South free from racial prejudice.

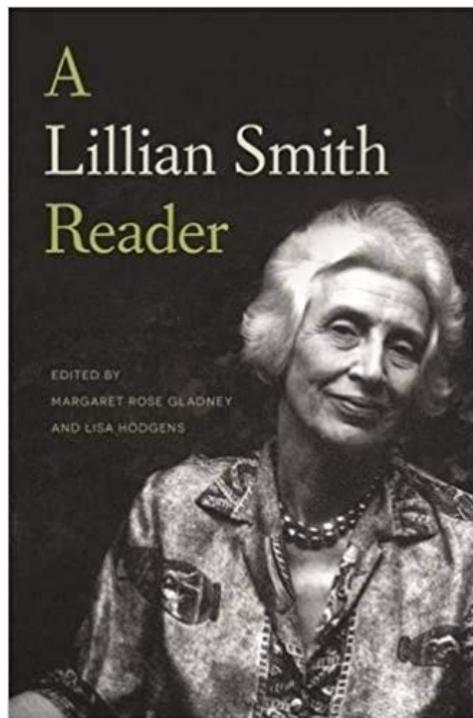
The *Reader* offers a thorough sampling of Smith’s writing in a somewhat chronological order, starting with a recollection from Smith’s childhood, entitled “Trembling Earth,” and ending with excerpts from *Our Faces, Our Words*, which is a collection of dramatic monologues recorded by Smith. In between are various essays, excerpts from Smith’s fiction, speeches, etc. from a lifetime of cultural criticism and real-world activism that attempted to make life better for everyone in the South. Each section, which is sometimes a standalone piece and other times a thematic

collection, is accompanied by commentary from the authors, letting the reader know contextual and historical information about Smith and the text itself. This is particularly helpful because Smith was a prolific opinion writer, commenting on the political and social goings-on of the pre- and post-World War II era with a sharp and erudite style. Her writing was able to cut through layers of pretense to the core issues.

Understanding this context shows the unique nature of Smith’s writing; she was not afraid to expose that which she deemed immoral in public life.

In many ways, Lillian Smith was prescient of today’s social struggles, or perhaps times just have not changed as much as we have thought. For example, in excerpts of her book *Now Is the Time* (1954) included in this anthology, Smith rails against Southerners who publicly support and enforce Jim Crow-era segregation, but privately treat black friends as family. This same dichotomy is often witnessed today, with

hard stances taken publicly, while softer or non-existent beliefs are expressed privately. This exposure of a kind of hypocrisy is typical of Smith, who viewed racism as inherently illogical and harmful to all involved. In her dialogue “Children Talking” (1945), Smith used the metaphor of an egg shell, illustrating that in order to protect their conscience from the disease of racial prejudice, white Southern children grow an egg shell around them and as it hardens it creates a barrier that cannot be broached later in life. Smith entreats the



children she teaches to break through this shell and build bridges to those they least understand.

A Lillian Smith Reader is a timely work that reintroduces a key figure of Southern cultural history. Through the works included in this volume, new readers will be introduced to ideas still necessary to dissect today. Similarly,

students of Southern history and literature will find a new compendium of primary sources from which to draw. This book is highly recommended for academic libraries, particularly those with Southern studies collections.

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