



# The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton

*Jane Smiley*

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**The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton** Jane Smiley  
THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Pulitzer Prize-winning author of **A Thousand Acres**

"Rousing . . . Action-packed . . . A gripping story about love, fortitude, and convictions that are worth fighting for."

--*Los Angeles Times*

A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK

"POWERFUL . . . Smiley takes us back to Kansas in 1855, a place of rising passions and vast uncertainties. Narrated in the spirited, unsentimental voice of 20-year-old Lidie Newton, the novel is at once an ambitious examination of a turning point in history and the riveting story of one woman's journey into uncharted regions of place and self."

--*Chicago Tribune*

"[A] grand tale of the moral and political upheavals igniting antebellum frontier life and a heroine so wonderfully fleshed and unforgettable you will think you are listening to her story instead of reading it. Smiley may have snared a Pulitzer for **A Thousand Acres** . . . but it is with Lydia (Lidie) Harkness Newton that she emphatically captures our hearts. . . . The key word in Smiley's title is Adventures, and Lydia's are crammed with breathless movement, danger, and tension; populated by terrifically entertaining characters and securely grounded in telling detail."

--*The Miami Herald*

"SMILEY BRILLIANTLY EVOKESES MID-19TH-CENTURY LIFE. . . . Richly imagined and superbly written, Jane Smiley's new novel is an extraordinary accomplishment in an already distinguished career."

--*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

"A SPRAWLING EPIC . . . A garrulous, nights-by-the-hearth narrative not unlike those classics of the period it emulates. In following a rebellious young woman of 1855 into Kansas Territory and beyond, the novel is so persuasively authentic that it reads like a forgotten document from the days of Twain and Stowe."

--*The Boston Sunday Globe*

"CONSISTENTLY ENTERTAINING, FILLED WITH ACTION AND IDEAS."

--*The New York Times Book Review*

"ENGAGING . . . [A] HARROWING ADVENTURE . . . This picaresque tale presents a series of remarkable characters, particularly in the inexperienced narrator, whose graphic descriptions of travel and domestic life before the Civil War strip away romantic notions of simpler times. . . . Smiley has created an authentic voice in this struggle of a young woman to live simply amid a swirl of deadly antagonism."

--*The Christian Science Monitor*

"A fine historical novel that describes a fascinating time and place . . . It is both funny and subtle, rich in ideas . . . Smiley has created a better all-around piece of fiction than any of her previous work, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning **A Thousand Acres**."

--*The Wall Street Journal*

"Smiley is a writer of rare versatility who travels widely in her creative endeavors. She proved her mastery of both short fiction and the novel with three sterling works (**The Age of Grief, Ordinary Love and Good Will**, and **A Thousand Acres**); her fondness for history had already been established with **The Greelanders**. In 1995, she successfully extended her repertoire to comedy with the hilarious academic satire **Moo**. What her new novel shares with all these works is its authorial intelligence."

--*The Boston Sunday Globe*

"Jane Smiley is nothing if not protean, a literary ventriloquist of incredible range. . . . This is a novel that manages to combine the evocative storyteller's voice with the moviemaker's sense of drama and visuals, an old-fashioned tale told with contemporary steam and panache."

--*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Not only is this a rollicking feminist tale of a woman who can handle herself in the thick of the Kansas Wars, **The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton** is also a coming of age story as well as a lasting portrait of the genuinely tumultuous time just before the Civil War."

--*The Raleigh News & Observer*

"A tale of love and war, revenge and betrayal, Smiley's fictional memoir invites comparisons with **Gone with the Wind**, even **War and Peace**. . . . Lidie Newton has the ring of honesty and truth. It also carries the stamp of its author's historical sense, stylistic verve, and moral passion."

--*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

"Full of the same arresting authenticity of detail that carried **A Thousand Acres**."

--*New York Daily News*

"LIDIE IS AN UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER . . .

The **All-True Travels** is a showcase for Smiley's range and dexterity, dead-on in its emotional impact and resonant in the painful truths it conveys."

--*San Diego Union-Tribune*

"Rendered in sharply lucid prose and filled with wonderful period detail . . . Lidie's story reads like a long and various dream, brightly colored and brilliantly observed--a journey into a world as troubled, ambiguous, and full of life as our own."

--*Chicago Tribune*

"An adventure story, full of suspense, near-misses, and coincidence . . . The first and sustaining marvel of [Smiley's] new novel is Lydia Newton's voice: grounded in 19th-century reserve, yet honest, self-aware, and curious."

--*Toronto Globe & Mail*

"Smiley nabbed a Pulitzer for **A Thousand Acres**. This stunning new effort should win equally thunderous acclaim."

--*Mademoiselle*

"An immensely appealing heroine, a historical setting conveyed with impressive fidelity and a charming and poignant love story make Smiley's new novel a sure candidate for bestseller longevity. . . . Propelled by Lidie's spirited voice, this narrative is packed with drama, irony, historical incident, moral ambiguities, and the perception of human frailty. . . . This novel performs all the functions of superior fiction: in reading one woman's moving story, we understand an historical epoch, the social and political conditions that produced it, and the psychological, moral, and economic motivations of the people who incited and endured its violent confrontations."

--*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"Gloriously detailed and brilliantly told, this is a hugely entertaining, illuminating, and sagacious vision of a time of profound moral and political conflict, and of one woman's coming to terms with the perilous, maddening, and precious world."

--*Booklist* (starred review)

"Smiley scales another peak with this bighearted and thoughtful picaresque novel. . . . [A] richly entertaining saga of a woman who might have been well matched with Thomas Berger's **Little Big Man**, and whom Huck Finn would have been proud to claim as his big sister."

--*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"HER FINEST WORK YET . . . Resembling a cross between the writing of Jane Austen, Stephen Crane, and Mark Twain . . . A fast-paced historical ride through a defining moment in our nation's history as seen through the eyes of a remarkable woman. . . . Smiley's biggest triumph is in the character of Lidie. One can actually 'see' her growth throughout the story as Lidie learns about the ambiguity of human morality--and that true justice is rarely served."

--*San Antonio Express-News*

"Highly recommended . . . Trust Smiley to take a situation charged with both social significance and novelistic opportunity and ride it for all its worth. . . . Smiley gives us a rich lode of historical detail yet keep the story moving, so that it seems to flow by like a river while at the same time yielding up its riches in leisurely fashion."

--*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Like **Cold Mountain** and **Beloved**--and with more than a casual nod to Mark Twain--this sprawling saga by the Pulitzer-winning author of **A Thousand Acres** connects readers to the historical issues of the time."

--*Glamour*

"Our heroine is a horse-riding, river-swimming, plain-faced young woman with a distinctly well-calibrated mind of her own."

--*The Baltimore Sun*

"A long, wild adventure . . . Lidie never loses her pluck, and her story becomes both a rich homage to **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn** and a thrilling variation on the derring-do of **Lonesome Dove**."

--*Outside* magazine

"[A] gripping, epic new novel . . . **The All-True Travels** is consistently absorbing, thanks in large part to the strong, vibrant voice of the unforgettable Lidie Newton."

--*Good Housekeeping*

"Packed with action in a setting worthy of a Western shoot-'em-up."

--*Newark Star-Ledger*

"ROUSING . . . ACTION-PACKED . . . A gripping story about love, fortitude, and convictions that are worth fighting for regardless of the outcome. . . . The voice Smiley creates for her sympathetic and wonderfully human heroine is sharp, engaging, wry, and wise."

--*Los Angeles Times*

## **The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton Details**

Date : Published December 29th 1998 by Ballantine Books (first published December 12th 1991)

ISBN : 9780449910832

Author : Jane Smiley

Format : Paperback 452 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Westerns

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## **From Reader Review The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton for online ebook**

### **D says**

Nice story that plays mostly in Missouri and the so-called 'Kansas territory' during the 'Bleeding Kansas' (see Wikipedia) period, i.e. 1840 - 1860. An engaging read but not as good as the 'Last Hundred Years' trilogy by the same author, probably because the historical narrative takes precedence over the fiction too often.

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### **Jessica says**

I really loved this book, but I could tell that it would not be universally appealing. My favorite part of the book is the author's excellent representation of the culture of the time period and the accurate and detailed portrayal of the many different settings throughout America in which heroine lives. Some readers may find some of Lidie's adventures toward the end of the novel a little far-fetched, but I felt like it added some good fun. Lidie Newton is certainly not your average heroine but she never steps outside the bounds of her historical persona. A great read for those who love unique female protagonists and detailed historical novels.

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### **Marcia Lonteen-Martin says**

The All-True Travels and Adventures of Liddie Newton is a great historical piece of fiction about a strong willed woman who embarks upon a cross country journey with her new husband. Jane Smiley follows up her Pulitzer Prize winning A Thousand Acres to present this strong narrative about a couple who believe so strongly in the abolitionist cause that they risk their lives time and time again. Lydia Harkness is the third of three sisters whom all assume will never marry. She's considered an old maid at 20, and prefers shooting guns and swimming over feminine pursuits. Along comes the educated Bostonian Thomas Newton who marries her and takes her away to settle the Kansas Territory (KT) . The area is volatile, with sorties from the adjacent Missouri territory protesting their anti-slavery cause. Leaving Quincy, Illinois, and living in this lawless territory has danger at every turn, and making it worse is that her nephew Frank comes along as her responsibility, one which becomes impossible to control. I loved the background leading up to their settling down. The courtship, the building of their small claim, their friends in the town of Lawrence, their beloved horse , their Mississippi riverboat ride, and all the details of the first half. Then the danger sets in, and Lidie finds herself a widow and now really begins to emerge as a strong heroine. Now her life goal becomes revenge, and she bravely and dangerously spends the rest of the novel pursuing that. Part of that involves living with a plantation family which shows her that often behind this divisive issue are good people who are just driven by tradition. I like what has been suggested: this novel embodies the ideas that what occurs is often not ideal for society, for women, or for Blacks.

I am intrigued by this view of history, the personification of some of the heroic abolitionists, and by such a strong female character who uses her intelligence and stealth to gain her end.

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### **Adrienne Jones says**

When a friend pressed this book into my hands, I felt a pang of guilt. She liked the book so much, and, as a reader with ample criticism, that made me nervous.

The paperback floated about the living room for weeks, and my friend periodically inquired about how I was enjoying it. After a disappointing re-encounter with *Cheaper by the Dozen*, I grabbed the closest the book to the armchair and ended up on an adventurous journey with one of my favorite female protagonists in recent years.

In 1855 Illinois, young Lidie, family pariah, finds herself orphaned as an adult dependent and subject to the limited mercies of her older half-sisters. Lidie's life-long campaign to resist the normal usefulness of women have made her an imposition to house. She neither reaps nor sews. With some intentionality she botches most household tasks or performs them at a trying pace.

As a result her sisters conspire to marry her off to the first suitor they can find... even if he is a d---ed abolitionist from New England heading to Kansas.

Thomas Newton, Lidie's impromptu husband, bolstered by stories from Lidie's teen nephew, admires Lidie's ability to shoot and ride horses. He revels in her courage, strength, and ability to swim across the wide river and sees in her a potential helpmate for the arduous life awaiting him on the Kansas frontier.

Newly married, the young idealist from New England and his bride board a steamboat for the West with little idea of what their near future will hold.

In a story of community, conflict, ideology, and action, author Jane Smiley, weaves a vivid portrait of the Kansas frontier and the incendiary political environment of the US Frontier on the cusp of the Civil War.

Throughout the novel, Smiley periodically touches upon facets of history I've previously read. She encapsulates interesting historical tidbits like the recruitment campaigns to draw people to new frontiers. Although much of this period is beyond my own historical reading what I could recognize was accurate and enhanced the story.

I found myself utterly transported and also surprisingly invested in the characters. When the story ended, I felt adrift without it.

Consider the book pressed into your hands.

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### **Brenda C Kayne says**

The first half of the book is a wonderful, creative piece of historical fiction based on a young woman's experience in Lawrence, Kansas just prior to the Civil War. The book is a dramatic, robust depiction of what it was like to be a "Free-Stater" and abolitionist among ignorant, gun happy pioneers. Lidie, the adventurous (but not so heroic) protagonist, comes to Kansas and its raucous, intense atmosphere through her marriage to a stoic, well-meaning New Englander. She would never have been allowed to go with him if it weren't for the naïveté of her family members who had no idea that living on the Kansas prairie or in Lawrence would be so rough and dangerous. Smiley portrays Lidie as a young woman somewhat on the fence ideologically as she settles in with the abolitionist clique. Her confusion lends itself to the reader's clarity of what the Mid-Western mindset was like during that time and the ever-growing divisiveness that would soon take over the

entire country in all its tragic manifestations.

The second half of the book is a movie, dramatic license and all. The decision to act out vengeance, the dressing up as a man, the unquestioning adoration of the plantation master, the cooincidence of relationship regarding a slave who takes care of Lidie - all of this gives entertaining momentum to the story but no longer has the meat of truth behind it. It is as if Smiley did not know what to do with Lidie after a certain dramatic point in the story. It still has the mark of good writing, however, and this second half of the story is a good read, too.

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### **Chrissie says**

The first half of the story is really, really good, but the second half doesn't quite ring true.

Nevertheless, the book isn't bad. I think it is improved by listening to rather than reading it. The narration by Anna Fields improves the book. The lines themselves are worth spending time on. Fields reads these lines with strength, clearly and strongly and slowly. You have time to think about what is being said. Secondly, through the narration the different characters' personalities come through distinctly; you comprehend from the voices used as you hear the different characters speak, who they are. You laugh even when some of the things stated are so ridiculously naive and wrong - because you so completely comprehend the character's personality. Through the expert narration you both pay attention to the lines and recognize the different personalities of the characters.

Maybe I should mention - this book is told to us by Lidie herself, so it has first person narration.

I have yet to even discuss the topic that is so worth our attention! The book is about the civil war in Kansas during 1855 through 1856, before the REAL American Civil War from 1861-1865, just a few years later. What you think about is civil wars in general and slavery. Nothing is cut and dry; nothing is simple. If you prohibit slavery, what then? You free the slaves, what then? Do you leave them to fend for themselves? What I really liked about this book is that different sides of each question are looked at closely, so you see the pros and cons, the arguments thrown back and forth by both sides. The civil war in Kansas was not only a matter of its being a slave state or a "Free-State" prohibiting slavery; it also concerned when and how and if it should become part of the United States of America. First it was only a Territory, nicknamed K.T., the Kansas Territory! I knew very little about the specifics of this earlier war. Even if you have read about the Civil War per se, this book has a different angle, i.e. the events as they played out in Lawrence, Kansas, and neighboring Missouri a few years earlier. You learn about these events through the life of a strong pioneer woman who lived through it. Yes, she is imaginary, but it doesn't feel that way. She tells you of her own experiences, what she thought and felt. One thing happens half way through the book. As I stated earlier, this didn't ring true for me. (view spoiler) But the ending is good. It is not sugar-coated.

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### **Linda Abhors the New GR Design says**

So bad I couldn't finish it. That means bad, because I almost always finish books I pick up, even if I don't like them much.

All I remember is a very inconsistent voice; she couldn't make up her mind whether her narrator would speak as an uneducated rube or one who would use stilted, formal expressions probably not encountered often in the plains in those days. These things would pop up within sentences of each other. Book club selection chosen by someone else. If I had gone on any further, I envisioned myself hoping that she'd be trampled by buffalo or caught in the North-South gunfire. I just couldn't get through it.

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### **Jillaire says**

My mom insisted on buying this for me at a garage sale. I think I'd give it 3.5 stars. It was very well-written and I couldn't put it down for the last 100-150 pages (it's 400+) because I had to know what was going to happen to Lidie. There are certainly many twists and turns. I just can't give it 4 stars because the ending was a little disappointing. I don't want to be a spoiler. It wasn't poorly written or even poorly conceived; I think that, as the reader, I was invested in Lidie and just wished it could have ended differently--but I suppose it couldn't, and perhaps that says a lot about the novel and the author: she wasn't willing to compromise her characters and story for the sake of a false ending.

Lidie is a young Illinois woman who marries a Massachusetts abolitionist on his way to Lawrence, Kansas in 1856 at the height of Anti- and Pro-Slavery tensions and violence that nearly caused the Civil War to start in the west and move east, instead of the other way around. Growing up in a border state, Lidie's family had a decidedly live-and-let-live attitude about slavery. Never quite *simpatico* with her siblings, it is not surprising that she is ready to adopt the views of her abolitionist husband--almost. She's not quite as "judicious" as he and her emotions--and even youth--lead her into some totally unexpected travels and adventures when she is faced with the greatest change of fortune in her young life.

This book was brilliantly researched and, although fiction, gives an excellent snapshot of a fascinating and important time in American history. The author said she wanted to write something about the intersection of ideology and violence in America and a friend said to her: "Kansas. 1850." From there this book was born.

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### **Liz says**

I just finished The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton. Someone in this club had read it, and it sounded interesting.

First of all I want to say, that after years of experience I no longer read 'book reviews' ala The New York Times, Business Week, etc. until I've finished a book. I enjoy putting thought and effort into my reading, and I can't stand the idea that my thoughts aren't original. I absolutely hate when people read the popular book du jour, (or watch a film for that matter) and all they have to say about it is only what they've heard from others.

I usually only read the first few sentences on the cover of a book, and if it has been recommended to me, if it sounds interesting, if I know of the author, or even if I like the title or artwork, I'll start reading. - I don't want to know the end, and I especially don't want to know what other people think of the book, certainly including typical elitist literary types

Now, you may be surprised at my point, but I really enjoy this little club and I do like reading other people's thoughts about the books they read. I hope that we will just stay original and be creative and not

condescending in other people's reading choices.

So anyway, I really enjoyed the novel. I was a history major in university and always favored early American history. I found the writing style easy and enjoyable. Of the six books I've read this year this would be number 2, (behind Rhett Butler's People, only because RBP was like reading a story about old friends...)

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### **Dara Salley says**

This was a thoroughly enjoyable book. I was a little put off by the title because it seemed a little whimsical to me, but I think it was just meant to be a reference to the overly ornate titles of certain books in the 1800's.

The book made me think about slavery in a different way. From my vantage point in history slavery has always seemed like a majestic moral issue. Reading this book made me realize that before the Civil War slavery was just another contentious political issue, similar to the health care or deficit debate nowadays. I've decided that whenever I get heated thinking about the position of Republicans on some issue or other, I'll just be glad I'm not debating whether or not human beings should be considered property.

The book also made me think about America as the pioneers saw it, which is a subject that often excites me. Imagining America as a vast, empty land of adventure is difficult in the year 2011 when it is a struggle to get more than 50 miles from a Walmart.

I won't give anything away, but I enjoyed the somber tone of the ending. America is a somber place whether you're in Kansas in the 1800's or in New York in the 2010's.

"We had swum in the ocean of religion all our lives and not gotten wet" p. 148

"I felt like a new thing, hardly formed, wearing a corset and a dress and a shawl and a bonnet and a pair of ladies' boots, carrying a parasol in my gloved hand, but inside that costume something else, which didn't fit, something I felt myself to be but couldn't name." p. 452

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### **Reid says**

This is a fine book, written with craft and style and yet....

If forced to pick just one, I think the adjective I would use to describe this novel is *sedate*, which is somewhat odd because it involves some of the most tumultuous times in one of the most contentious areas in American history, the years just before the Civil War at the intersection between North and South. Smiley does a fine job invoking the time, and I admire her apparent scholarship, but the story itself is surprisingly mild.

Don't get me wrong, I am not asking for more violence or blood. But the emotional upheaval and general chaos of the time and place are simply not communicated with any clarity to the reader. It's as if we are standing at one remove from all the struggles of our protagonist, even as she is going through them. It is hard

to put a finger on why this is so, but I know it has something to do with the languid language Smiley chooses to tell this story.

The basic plot is this: Lydia Harkness is a young woman in a small Illinois town who yearns for something more from her life. When Thomas Newton shows up and declares he is headed to the Kansas Territory, she is all ears. Newton's intent in going there is two-fold: he wishes to homestead, but he is also an abolitionist, who, along with several hundred others, is hoping to populate this new territory with the like-minded so that it will never be a slave state. The neighboring state of Missouri has a quite different idea. The conflict between the two is uncivil and often violent. Lidie must eventually leave the territory, and her travels and travails take up the second half of the book.

One challenge of writing historical fiction, I would guess, is the very fact that you are constrained by the facts that dictate what is plausible. But I do wonder if Smiley is capable of juggling the competing aspirations of historical fidelity and novelistic readability. It is passing strange that a book with all of these elements should be, in fact, rather dull.

But this truly is an enjoyable book in many ways. The characters are distinctive and strongly written. The history is a fascinating slice of an era of which most of us are unaware. We truly care what happens to Lidie Newton. Unfortunately, in the end, we just don't care all that much.

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### **Jaline says**

Kansas Territory in the mid-19th Century was a hotbed of conflict and a commonwealth of hardship. Struggling to enter the Union, it was formed by settlers attracted by the opportunity to "claim" land and make a fresh start in life. Lawrence, Kansas was founded by the New England Emigrant Aid Company and its initial platform was political – on the side of abolitionists. However, just across the river was Missouri and the people of the time in that State were just as strongly pro-slavery.

As with many early pioneering tales, no matter how noble the cause – whether political, religious, cultural, or social – there are also those who ride in on the coat tails of struggle as opportunists. This book has it all, as lived through the adventures and travels of Lidie Newton. She narrates this story as only she could and it is many-sided and multi-dimensional in scope.

Lidie was the sole living child of her father's second marriage and much younger than her half-siblings. Her mother devoted herself to her one duckling and Lidie knew her letters at age 2, was reading from the family Bible at 4, and eager to learn everything that came her way. Her mother died when Lidie was still quite young, she was a tall girl and what was referred to in those days as "plain". Still, she caught the eye of New Englander Thomas Newton when he was passing through to Kansas Territory and they married.

This was the beginning of her adventures – and ours, as the readers of her tale. Lidie was always smart but now she learned how to use her intelligence to help build a life in a hostile environment. She was physically strong and capable, though in her own family home (and those of her elder sisters) she found every way possible to shirk chores.

Through the course of this book, Lydia's growth was not only of the mind and body, but also emotional and spiritual. She learned to see life from many different perspectives and could acknowledge the rightness of each of them and the paradox that this presented. Lidie learned to live in the present moment and think and

act appropriately for that moment because it was the only one that mattered – the only one that carried weight. Simultaneously, the future kept pulling her forward.

Every step of the way, I felt like I was Lidie's shadow – sometimes stretching in front of her, sometimes behind her, and sometimes right beside her. Jane Smiley has written an absorbing story that gathered me into its pace and momentum right from the beginning. There is a lot of action in this book yet there is also a lot to contemplate. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is willing to look at a time and a place from a multi-level viewpoint. This story is moving, stimulating, timely and timeless.

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### **Sharyl says**

I read this years ago. and will try to find my review...

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### **Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says**

This story of one woman's turbulent life in the newly-created Kansas Territory both entertains and educates. Wanting to escape a life of household chores in her sisters' homes, Lidie marries an abolitionist passing through her Illinois town on the way to Kansas. The Kansas Territory isn't what she expected, though, and she spends the bulk of the book dealing with challenges ranging from terrible weather to violent Border Ruffians.

Unlike some other reviewers, I found this book not just well-written but very engaging; the myriad challenges of KT and the characters' complex relationships were more than enough to hold my interest. I also learned from this book, and Lidie's voice felt right on: Smiley apparently read hundreds of nineteenth-century documents to get a feel for the way someone like Lidie would have expressed herself, and it shows. The realistic voice, and the attention paid to 1850s sensibilities (for instance, Lidie, who is no prude, is startled when a friend announces herself to be "pregnant"; "as if she were a dog," Lidie comments) lend a great deal of credibility to the story.

Also excellent was the complexity of the characters. Writing about slavery often results in black-and-white characterization, but here we have a heroine who is moved by individual stories without passionately opposing the institution itself; die-hard abolitionists who nevertheless want to keep freed slaves out of the territory; men who have never owned slaves but are still willing to kill or die to maintain slavery; and many more. While it's clear that the anti-slavery settlers have the moral high ground, Smiley doesn't gloss over the violence on either side, and she also pokes gentle fun at the settlers' propensity toward melodrama and outrage (they refer to a standoff as a "war," for instance). Seeing how life on the frontier affected the characters was also a highlight. And of course the heroine herself, with a strong, individual personality, keeps things interesting.

However, I was less pleased with the last third of the book, in which Lidie has "adventures" in Missouri. Her ability to pass herself off as a man, even to her male co-workers in the job she oh-so-conveniently obtains, stretches credibility rather too far. And while this section feels like it's leading up to something big, very little actually happens in it, especially for the amount of page time it takes up. I understand why the author wanted to take us to Missouri and introduce us to slaves and slaveholders--it does round out the book by

adding additional and very relevant perspectives--but I can't help feeling like it's not done as well as it could have been. And the interactions between Lidie and the slave woman Lorna feel terribly stilted.

Overall, I enjoyed the book and found it to be very well-written. While the last section didn't seem to accomplish what it set out to do, I still recommend this book.

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### **Dale says**

**An interesting look at the 1850s in the Kansas Territory through the eyes of a young woman.**

*Read by Mare Winningham.*

*Lasts about 5 hours.*

I purchased the abridged version of *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* on tape (5 hours) and found it to be quite enjoyable. The listener is treated to a ground level view of the politics of slavery in the 1850s and how violence based on the 'goose question' (code for the slavery issue) swept through households, towns and eventually the entire Kansas Territory.

Smiley's characters are not simple cardboard cutouts - some of the pro-slavery people are quite nice, some of the anti-slavery people are quite insane (she mentions 'Old Brown' and his atrocities and his actions cause some dissent in Liddie Newton's household).

Many readers have complained of the plodding pace. Although my version was abridged, there were still some plodding moments. However, the superb reading by Mare Winningham spared the listener from most of those moments. She is able to express so much emotion and humor with her voice that I found myself forgetting that Mare Winningham is a modern actress. She sounds like she is an older woman telling of her sad, profound trip through a bit of American history.

<http://dwdsreviews.blogspot.com/>

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### **Andrew Breslin says**

Jane Smiley is one of my favorite writers, and this is my favorite of her books. *A Thousand Acres* got a lot more attention, including the Pulitzer Prize and an insultingly modified Hollywood adaptation, but this is the one that really blew me away.

You can't really discuss this book without comparing it to *Huckleberry Finn*, one of the greatest books ever written, hands down, no contest. Both concerned escaped slaves seeking freedom during the tumultuous period preceding the Civil War. In fact, my version of this book contains an interview with Smiley, in which she sort of disses Mark Twain's classic, but I managed to erect some sort of psychological literary defense mechanism and still respect and greatly enjoy Smiley, in spite of this one glaring point on which she is, obviously, just plain wrong.

One of the things that I always look for in a book is realistic evocation of time and place, and she pulls this off masterfully. I felt like I was there. After I put it down, I was ready to run out and join the abolitionist

movement, and put an end to slavery once and for all. Turns out they did this already. Well done, abolitionists! It's great to be back in the 21st century after my brief sojourn in the 19th. Now, 150 years later, we've finally achieved racial harmony. Isn't it great?

Pardon my sardonic cynicism. This is a great book. :)

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### **Nancy says**

One reviewer called this book Little House on the Prairie for Adults. A cutsy turn of phrase, but not what I thought this book deserved.

Set in the 1850s in Kansas Territory, the story is about the people who were settling the area, how they survived the winter on the prairie and how high the feelings ran about whether or not the area would enter the United States as free or slave.

Lidie Newton comes to this Kansas Territory with her husband, Thomas, who is an abolitionist, determined to insure Kansas is free. After a murder, Lidie leaves Lawrence, Kansas, to seek revenge. Where she goes and how she eventually reaches her home in Quincy comprises much of the "travel and adventures."

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### **Torimac says**

It was stunning at times. I did wonder why the author chose to use "g --" & "d---" instead of spelling those words out while she used several idioms of "the N word" straight out. I still struggle with that. I can see where the main character may have made that choice if these had actually been her writings, or maybe I can't?

I seem to remember reading "true life" narratives from writers who were black, and some who were former slaves, written in the 19th century, and the use of the "N-word" was deplorable to them. I got the impression that a person freed from slavery made negative judgements of a white person saying it in similar ways that it is considered to this day. Why wouldn't Lidie have picked up that information before she wrote her narrative? She was so observant of how people used language and how they reacted to different uses of language.

Otherwise, I think I loved every bit of it.

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### **Nomi says**

I have liked Jane Smiley books in the past and looked forward to this one. Unfortunately, I think it would have been better named the Trials and Tribulations rather than Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton. I am from Lawrence, KS myself, so reading about Lawrence in 1855 was of interest to me for many reasons. I kept slogging through, hoping the story would pick up and carry me along, but ultimately I felt "message" overshadowed "story," a perspective I didn't really develop till reading the interview with the author at the

end of the paperback. By that time I was not surprised to learn this book was not a bestseller, although had been apparently well-reviewed when it was first released. Pacing was tedious, insights repetitive and limited. I am glad this book worked for some of my fellow Goodreads members, but not for me.

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## **Antenna says**

Despite caring little about the issue of slavery which is propelling 1850s America ever closer to civil war Lidie Harkness agrees to marry the thoughtful but arguably naïve New Englander, Thomas Newton, a committed “abolitionist”. A book-loving tomboy, who likes to ride a horse bareback, and once swam the treacherous Mississippi for the sheer challenge, she is lured by the adventure of life as a settler’s wife, developing a “claim” on the “free soil” of the falsely promoted Kansas Territory. All too soon she experiences not only the harsh reality of life on the prairies, particularly in the freezing winter, but also the vicious hostility of the perhaps somewhat stereotyped residents of adjoining Missouri, unwilling to accept a democratically elected slave-free state, convinced that this will destroy the economic and social order.

Perhaps inspired by the divisions in her own family tree, with a grandfather’s branch Southern sympathisers, but her grandmother’s progressive abolitionists, Jane Smiley has researched in depth the fascinating question of whether or not to permit slavery in the newly established states as pioneers pushed further westwards. As a result, the book sometimes reads like a condensed history shoehorned into a novel. I was frustrated by the fact this is often hard to follow, without the disruption of breaking off to check the details elsewhere. It could be argued that, since the narrative is so strongly based on Lidie Newton’s viewpoint, her limited and confused understanding of events is realistic. Instead, she writes with much more precision and insight about filling in the chinks in her cabin walls or forming a relationship with the rashly purchased horse Jeremiah.

Jane Smiley clearly prefers writing in-depth about the complexity and contradictions of relations between individuals and the details of daily life. Although one cannot know how authentic this is, she has managed to sustain what reads like the “voice” of a young nineteenth century American woman - inexperienced and inevitably limited by her upbringing but perceptive and resilient, with a wry humour.

At first, I wondered why this book is not as widely known and praised as Jane Smiley’s “A Thousand Acres” but although it is a page turner in parts, I soon found it weighed down with tedious wordiness, a long list of examples when two or three would do, the same point made several different ways, repetition of words. In short, Lidie’s thoughts and the lengthy disquisitions of some characters could do with a good edit. Yet perhaps the author seeks to emulate the styles of C19 authors she admires, like Dickens, George Eliot and Anthony Trollope. This seems borne out by the way every chapter starts with a quotation from Lidie’s “bible”, “A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home” by Catherine Beecher Stowe, while every chapter and even page is titled with a brief indication of what is happening.

Having gritted my teeth to endure the style, I was absorbed by much of this book, and it certainly created an interest in learning more about American history in the run-up to the Civil War. However, in addition to being over-long and in need of more rigorous editing, it hinges on some unnecessarily implausible plot developments, and its ending seems unsatisfactory, too abrupt (after all the verbiage) and weak.

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