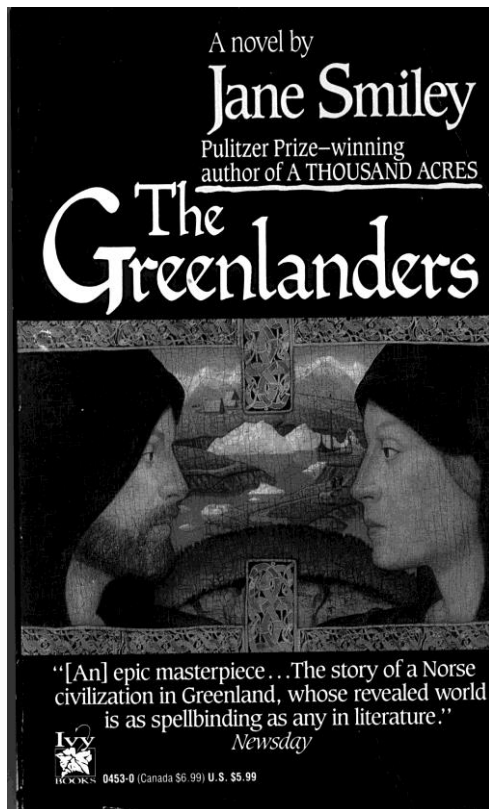


JANE SMILEY. UNA APROXIMACIÓN A SU OBRA NOVELÍSTICA, Jane Smiley y Juan Antonio Perles, *presentación por Juan Antonio Perles*, Universidad de Málaga (Publicado en *Analecta Malacitana*, XX, 2, 1997, págs. 625-632)

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Jane Smiley (n. 1949), autora estadounidense ganadora del premio Pulitzer en 1992 por su novela *A Thousand Acres* (1991), es una de esas pocas narradoras que ha sabido compatibilizar el cultivo de lo que en los Estados Unidos se llama *literary fiction*, el tipo de creación novelística más cercano a las formas narrativas canonizadas, y el éxito comercial. Esto es un fenómeno poco frecuente en un país donde la *formula fiction*, las narraciones que siguen un patrón único que el autor reproduce en cada publicación, copa los primeros puestos de las listas de los más vendidos. Efectivamente, su última novela, *Moo* (1995), permanece, muchos meses después de su publicación, en la lista que elabora el prestigioso rotativo *The New York Times*.



Este éxito no es en absoluto gratuito, y responde tanto a sus excelentes dotes para narrar como a una sabia elección de los subgéneros novelísticos en los que se encuadra su producción. Por ejemplo, en *A Thousand Acres*, Smiley reescribe la tragedia shakespeariana *King Lear* situando la acción en una comunidad agraria del medio oeste y en *Moo* sigue el modelo anglosajón de comedia universitaria o *Campus novel*.

Además de las dos novelas mencionadas, Smiley también es la autora de *The Greenlanders* (1988), *The Age of Grief* (1987), *Duplicate Keys* (1984), *At Paradise Gate* (1981), *Barn Blind* (1980) y un número indeterminado de historias cortas y estudios críticos.

Jane Smiley visitó España en la primavera de 1996 invitada por la Embajada de Estados Unidos en Madrid y el Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Francesa de la Universidad de Málaga. La entrevista que sigue a continuación fue realizada en los momentos previos a una conferencia sobre su obra presentada en el Aula de Grados María Zambrano de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de nuestra Universidad.

En la actualidad, Jane Smiley simultanea la escritura con la docencia de un curso de creación literaria en Iowa State

University.

Jane Smiley: An Insight into the Novelist and her latest Work

J. A. Perles.— Have you always wanted to be a writer, even when you were younger, or is it something that came to you later in life?

J. Smiley.— Well, I would say it was when I was in my mind teens, seventeen or so, when I decided that I was interested in writing. Then I became more interested in College.

J. A. Perles.— Through reading?

J. Smiley.— Yes, but not reading *good things*, mostly through reading *bad things*. When I was growing up I read «serious» books like *Nancy Drew and The Bosby Twins*, and books like that, written for children. I enjoyed reading and it was probably one of my major hobbies as a child so it seemed like the natural thing to do, to write them.

J. A. Perles.— Do your children, your daughters and son, read as well?

J. Smiley.— Oh, yes. They're very interested readers and they might be interested writers, but they are too young to know for the moment.

J. A. Perles.— Can you make a living as a novelist in the usa or do you have to rely on movie rights for that?

J. Smiley.— You don't have to rely on movie rights because anything related to movies is much too arbitrary. It is much more arbitrary than publishing. But it is hard to make a living without some sort of other job like a teaching job or something else.

J. A. Perles.— Does teaching take time away from your writing? How can you teach, write, comply with deadlines for your work and be with your family, all at the same time?

J. Smiley.— I never found that teaching took away from my writing. In fact, it was helpful because I have taught literature for a long time. Thinking about literature and being asked questions about literature was helpful when thinking about my own writing. But I have also taught writing courses and that is helpful too. I don't think that teaching writing courses is a waste of time. I think it helps you formulate your ideas about what makes a story work and what makes a novel work. I have not had any problems teaching and writing at the same time.

J. A. Perles.— But weren't students demanding? Didn't they need your individual attention?

J. Smiley.— Well, we don't have a tutorial system. My students don't get a lot of help outside of class. We talk about their work inside class. In the creative writing courses we talk about a draft of their work each week and the whole class focuses on it and I focus on it and then they take away what we say and they try to rewrite it. But it's not like in the European universities where you spend a lot of one on one time outside of class with your students.

J. A. Perles.— I would say that that corresponds more to the northern European model than our model. We have too many students for that. Do you consider yourself a best-seller writer? And a feminist writer? If you had to give yourself a label, which one would it be?

J. Smiley.— I guess I consider myself a respectable mainstream literary novelist. There's a certain amount of overlap. There's enough of an audience for literary fiction in the States so that some literary writers get to make it onto the best seller lists. But usually out of, say, fifteen titles on the best seller list, maybe three or four are literary and the rest are popular, commercial fiction.

J. A. Perles.— Would it be correct to say that your main subject matter when writing your novels, for example *Barn Blind* or *A Thousand Acres*, is the family and particularly family disgrace?

J. Smiley.— I don't know whether it would be correct, but that's what I am known for. I would say that my longest novels, which are *Moo*, *A Thousand Acres* and the *Greenlanders*, are more about how families mesh into a larger society. The *Greenlanders*, which is my longest novel, has as its core group a family, but it is really about extinction more than anything else, and *Moo* does not have a family in particular as its central group.

J. A. Perles.— You have written many different types of novel. *Moo* is a comic novel, *Greenlanders* is a historical novel, *A Thousand Acres* is a tragedy, in capital letters, that follows *King Lear*'s model. Did you do that because you didn't want to be classified in one sub-genre?

J. Smiley.— No, I don't really take an instrumental approach at all. I don't try to do something in order for something to happen or not happen. I just write what interests me. I wanted to try an epic, and I wanted to try a tragedy and a comedy and a romance. Those are the great forms of literature and I wanted to fiddle around with each one. So I have written three and now I am working on the fourth.

J. A. Perles.— Did your life change after winning the Pulitzer Prize for *A Thousand Acres*?

J. Smiley.— Well, yes and no. I mean, in addition to winning the prize I was also pregnant so I had another baby, which in some ways made my life continue the same way because I didn't start travelling very much. I wasn't really susceptible to the blandishments of the Pulitzer Prize. But on the other hand, my life changed a lot because I had another baby. I would say the Pulitzer does make you more famous, it does make people want to publish essays by you. It puts your name on the top of various lists and your book makes more money. In watching the people that have won the Pulitzer Prize since, it hasn't had the same effect in every person's career. I think that when a lot of people were introduced to *A Thousand Acres*, specially women, the book became very popular and has continued to be very popular, but I am not sure that it has had the same effect with some of the other Prize winners since.

J. A. Perles.— Out of your seven novels written to date, which one is your favorite work?

J. Smiley.— Probably *The Greenlanders*.

J. A. Perles.— Why?

J. Smiley.— Well, *The Greenlanders* was pretty gripping for me as an author. I worked on it for a long time and I thought about it for a long time before I started working on it. A lot of the story is not made up, the correct term would be «pieced together» from the Icelandic Chronicles and other bits of Greenlandic history. I found the story, even though all there was out there was very small, quite enthralling and I found the extinction of the Greenlanders interesting and compelling, so I really got a lot from that.

J. A. Perles.— I also read somewhere that you enjoyed yourself writing *Moo*.

J. Smiley.— Yes, I did.

J. A. Perles.— But it didn't make it your favourite work.

J. Smiley.— Well, sometimes. They are probably my two favourites.

J. A. Perles.— Do you feel more comfortable with longer fiction than with short stories or novellas and if so, why? Are there commercial reasons for publishing longer fiction?

J. Smiley.— I like longer fiction. I just like to not have so many stops and starts. I like to be in the middle of something and developing it.

J. A. Perles.— But you started with shorter fiction.

J. Smiley.— Well, I think that's typical. But it also has to do with creative writing programmes in the States which a lot of people go to. It's very difficult to discuss a novel or chapters from a novel in a creative writing class, so most students end up writing short stories for a while and I don't think that's bad. I think that gives them some handle on the tools of writing fiction.

J. A. Perles.— In writing *Moo* you have clearly written a «Campus novel» that follows David Lodge's *Small World* fairly closely. Do you think that the readership for it is smaller in quantity than, for instance, a tragedy like *A Thousand Acres*?

J. Smiley.— I don't know. It might be different. An animal scientist at a university like this might read this book and not read *A Thousand Acres*. On

the other hand, a woman, housewife, might read *A Thousand Acres* and not read *Moo*. So, if every American student and professor read *Moo*, I'd be on the best seller list for years. It is funny for people out there who are involved in some sort of university life.

J. A. Perles.— Do you think of an audience when you are writing?

J. Smiley.— No.

J. A. Perles.— You have said that although *Moo* is set in a land-grant Midwestern University, your model has not been Iowa State, where you have been teaching for the last 14 years. Have you convinced the faculty around you that this is so?

J. Smiley.— Oh, sure. They don't recognize anything in it, so, I didn't have to do any convincing.

J. A. Perles.— None at all? Haven't you noticed any paranoiac readings of your latest novel, with any colleagues insistently looking for similarities and parallelisms?

J. Smiley.— Not that I know of. Nothing that happens in *Moo* ever happened there.

J. A. Perles.— So you wrote carefully selecting the plot events.

J. Smiley.— Well, that implies that I know things that have happened at Iowa State that I don't. It is a very big Campus, like this university, and it would be like knowing everything that has happened here for years and you just couldn't do it. So, from my point of view, it was better to make it up and what I made up did not bear any resemblance to anything that ever happened there.

J. A. Perles.— In *Moo* you have successfully satirized the most outstanding weaknesses of the Midwestern University System. Would you extend your views to the whole of the United States?

J. Smiley.— Well, in some ways. Every university in the United States is under pressure to accept money from private sources. There are two higher education traditions in the United States, one is public and one is private, and that always puts the public universities on the spot because the government bodies like the State Legislatures, who are supposed to pay for the public universities always think there is some way that they can wiggle out of paying for them. They are always looking for ways to cut costs and to shirk what I consider is their responsibility. So the public universities are always being pushed into the arms of the corporations by the Legislature because the Legislature does not want to pay. This results in constant tension on the

Campus because, of course, the corporations consider that you get some services for your payment. They may or may not even pay lip service to the idea of academic freedom. When the corporation is paying a private university, or when a private donor puts up a theatre at a private university so that the students can put on a show, they think of it as charitable. But when they put up a physics lab or a chemistry lab at a public university they think of it as payment for something. So all of the funding of American universities is muddled by the mixture of private and public money. I don't know how it is in Europe, I am assuming that the government just pays.

J. A. Perles.— Yes.

J. Smiley.— I think that's probably a better model. I mean, in some ways, as in England in the Thatcher era, it makes the university very susceptible to the whims of the government. If the government is anti-intellectual, anti-university, then it will crush the university, as Thatcher tried to do. But in the States there is always someone to be beholden to.

J. A. Perles.— Don't you think that private funding is a dangerous way of putting the universities know-how and expertise to the service of the big corporations?

J. Smiley.— It's more dangerous in some areas than others. If the corporation sees that this is a chief way to get something, like a patent, then it can be very dangerous. It is not in the interest of the government or bodies to say no, to be moral about the money. If they do, they consider themselves stupid. You get to a situation where there is a real conflict of interests between one of academic propriety and one of self interest. I think you can say with a fair amount of confidence that most American scientists and scholars do well in adhering to rigorous standards of academic freedom and academic inquiry but the temptations and even the coercions are always present. A university is a part of a country's culture, just like everything else, and in America the culture is constantly being swept by fads and ideas and people in the university go along with them just like anybody else.

J. A. Perles.— Would public funding be a way to avoid that?

J. Smiley.— That is what I think. I don't know how it works elsewhere, but public funding also has its own problems. You were speaking about people in the Spanish universities coming into university and then staying in that university and being there for their whole career. That kind of very structured academic world can have its problems too. So you pay your money and take your choice.

J. A. Perles.— Do you think that *Moo* is more difficult to read, due to the large cast of characters, than any of your previous novels? I must confess that at the beginning I felt a bit lost with so many characters that had a similar name. Did you intentionally want the reader to confuse these characters?

J. Smiley.— No I didn't want to get the girls mixed up or confuse the reader. I think when you have a large cast of characters you can do what you can to make them distinct from one another, but it just takes a while for everybody to get sorted out in the readers mind. There are all types of novels. There are novels that are focused around a single or few characters where we get to know these characters very well and the reader is never confused. But the reader might also feel that the focus on those couple of characters is claustrophobic and that you want to be reading something broader. A novel that tries to have a broad scope has other inherent problems: confusion and maybe lack of depth. You just have to try and choose the form that does the most of what you want to do and then do the best you can to mitigate the problems and hope that the reader will keep up or be able to go along with what you are doing as best he or she can.

J. A. Perles.— In *Moo* all the scholars that accept an outside financial source are trying to achieve artificial change over an order that has been naturally set (e. g. Dr. Gift's report positively advising gold mining in Costa Rica's Cloud Forest, Dean's project to obtain a state of permanent pregnancy in milking cows). Are you implying that man would be better not to meddle with God's order of things? Could this attitude be understood as resistance to change?

J. Smiley.— Well, I don't know. It would certainly be resistance rather than opposition to change. There hasn't been enough resistance to technological change, there hasn't been enough friction, there haven't been enough questions asked. What people seem to do is go ahead and do something because it can be done or because they want to do it, and then twenty years later say: Oh my God, we shouldn't have done that! That's the lesson of our time. That's the lesson of D.D.T., that's the lesson of lobotomy, the lesson of the atomic bomb, the lesson of even the automobile. People went ahead and acted and after the result of what they did came back to haunt them they said: Oh, Gee, we could have foreseen this and we did know that bla bla would happen. I think that's a question that needs to be asked about technology at this point because the results of almost every technological change of our century have been mixed. There are very few technological changes where you can say this is all for the good. Even in the cases of important improvements like some of the vaccines that prevent childhood diseases, as suddenly you have a huge over population. So we can't even say that life is good any more, that life itself is a purely positive value because then, as the population of the world mushrooms, we suddenly have too much life. I always imagined an endangered species like the Bengal tiger, hearing about some new human vaccine and saying: Oh my God, there is going to be even more of them now! All the things that everybody thought were good in the year 1900, and then went ahead and achieved, now turn around to have a down side too.

J. A. Perles.— *Moo* has been a best seller in the United States. Do you think this is due to your critical attitude towards, in the eyes of society, a privileged educational institution?

J. Smiley.— I think *Moo* is selling well because *A Thousand Acres* sold well. The people who are buying *Moo* are people who are already interested in my work and those people I don't think are generally hostile to universities. I think it's selling well because it is entertaining. Like all comic novels, the tone isn't for every one. Some people think it's too benign, others think it's too chilly, whatever, but in general people just find it entertaining.

J. A. Perles.— *Moo* has recently been translated into Spanish. Why do you think that a Spanish audience would be interested in reading a novel that is so culturally inscribed in the American University system? Do you think a Spaniard would understand all the comical references that you deliberately establish in your novel?

J. Smiley.— Well, I don't know. I guess I feel that European or non-American readers should read it not because they can relate to it but because what they don't know can't hurt them. This is how things are being invented in the United States. It's not Thomas Edison in his little shop who is inventing the electric light bulb, it's people at Land Grant Universities, like Iowa State. Iowa State is where the computer was invented, it's where some components of the fax machine were invented, where corn was hybridized. It is where the Green Revolution began in the late sixties and early seventies. So, those four things right there have transformed the world. There are certain types of people at those universities that are doing the inventing and they are naive, they are very provincially American, they do not understand or have much interest in history or culture. In many cases they are the sons of Protestant missionaries, which is how they got their interest in foreign countries and their knowledge of those languages and they truly believe in technology and improvement of life through technology and they are changing our lives. Nobody is stopping them. For a European or a non-American this world may not be familiar but it is relevant to what is happening to them. So I think if I were European I would read it just for a depiction of an important, but unknown facet of my world. I wouldn't read it as the story of a spoof on a university because it wouldn't be the same.

J. A. Perles.— Apart from the success of your last novel, your name has also been the center of a polemic which started when your article «It Ain't So Huck» was published in *Harper's Magazine*. There you argued that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was not the greatest American novel and you recommended the inclusion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the School Curricula. Can you comment on this?

J. Smiley.— I think that the discourse on racial matters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would have been a better starting point for discourse on racial matters in the U.S. in 1850 than, let's say, the discourse on racial matters in *Huck Finn*. This is because there is a constant public discussion in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* about slavery, about what black people are like, about various white attitudes towards black people. This same discussion also takes place among the slaves; what should we do, what is the moral thing to do, what is the political thing to do, what is the right thing to do. I feel in *Huck Finn*, everything that takes place between Huck and Jim is private, it's either between Huck and Jim or within Huck, when he ponders things. That notion in terms of American society of racism being a private feeling has not worked out. It has come to the end of its useful life in our generation and the distrust that seems to exist or the uneasiness that seems to exist between the races seems to me to have been enhanced by the silence, by the sense that this is a private feeling. There is more suspicion rather than less. So, when I was reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* I was struck by how much discussion and what a not private issue this was in the 1850s and I thought, well, if we had managed to keep the discussion going rather than have everybody fall silent after the Civil War, if we had managed to keep this discussion going things might be better now than they are.

That was a kind of specialized point. The main thrust of the article was that I didn't consider *Huck Finn* the greatest American novel and I felt that its elevation to that has been damaging to other works and to our social interaction.

J. A. Perles.— What are you working on at the moment?

J. Smiley.— I am working on an nineteenth century novel. That's all I ever say about it.

J. A. Perles.— Thank you very much for your time.

RESUMEN PARA REPERTORIOS BIBLIOGRÁFICOS

TÍTULO: JANE SMILEY. UNA APROXIMACIÓN A SU OBRA NOVELÍSTICA.

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RESUMEN: entrevista en la que Jane Smiley considera sus inicios como escritora y ofrece una valoración general sobre su obra. El núcleo de la entrevista versa sobre su última producción de éxito, *Moo*, una novela que analiza en clave de humor algunas implicaciones morales en sus conexiones con la sociedad.

ABSTRACT: in this interview Jane Smiley comments on her preferences as a writer and evaluates her work in terms of reception and personal preferences. The core of the

interview deals with her latest best-seller, *Moo*, a novel that humorously considers the moral implications of the difficult interconnections between the University and the society that supports them.

DESCRIPTORES: narrativa norteamericana / narrativa de mujeres / novela universitaria.

KEY-WORDS: american fiction / women's fiction / campus novel.