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Going Back to A Thousand Acres



by James Calvin Schaap

What may be most disconcerting about the very frequent attempts to discredit what has been called “repressed memory” is the kind of chaos into which all of us have been thrust by our inability to know the whole truth. In the last decade, few of us have not been affected by revelations made by someone of our acquaintance, revelations that real sexual abuse had occurred at some moment in his

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or her childhood, events previously buried beneath the protective will of human memory. Those repressed memories, suddenly revealed, often led to horrifying accusations and almost inevitable family strife, even though the victims would argue that severe family problems were already present for years, simply denied by both perpetrators and victims.

While some of us may have felt reluctant to believe in the fad-like growth of those accusations, not believing the revelations often seemed—and still does—not only impossible, but even more abusive. But a few years back a spate of books began to assault the whole concept of repressed memory (Lawrence Wright’s *Remembering Satan*, Michael D. Yapko’s *Suggestions of Abuse*, and Lenore Terr’s *Unchained Memories*—all published in May of 1994). Television news shows and newspaper articles reconsidered their own previous headlines. Perhaps those awful events our friends vehemently claim to remember never actually occurred.

Suddenly calling “repressed memory,” “‘False’ Memory Syndrome” instead has made all of our lives more difficult. When Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago found himself a defendant in a \$10 million lawsuit by an ex-parishioner who claimed to remember being abused at the age of 17, we winced, knowing that similar abuse has occurred elsewhere. But when that same accuser publicly retracted his accusation only a few months later, claiming his false memory was stimulated by image-inducing therapy, our joy at the Cardinal’s innocence was muted, at least in part,

by our realization that knowing the whole truth in similar situations—even our friends' situations—may well be impossible.

The functions of the mind, the ability of memory to create its own truth, the manner by which evil can be prompted *from* the memory itself are all matters well beyond my knowledge and expertise. What is of interest to me as a teacher of imaginative literature, however, is the way an issue like repressed memory itself affects writers and the literature we esteem as a culture.

Enter Jane Smiley, author of *A Thousand Acres*, a powerfully evocative novel of rural Midwestern life and winner of the 1989 Pulitzer Prize for literature. As a resident of the state of Iowa, I was elated by her being honored, not only because Smiley was an Iowan, but also because I'd known her work previously, used it in my classes, and found my students appreciating her ability to move into the recesses of human motivation in a way that captures vividly our own sense of "how we are." Even before reading *A Thousand Acres*, I thought Ms. Smiley deserved the praise afforded Pulitzer winners; and after making my way through this dark but brilliant novel, I was even more sure that the accolades were deserved. But then, I'm an Iowan.

At the center of her novel, however, lies incest and repressed memory. It's fair to say that when the book was written, few would have hazarded even the faintest objection to the validity of repressed memory. When I read the novel in the summer of 1989, I simply believed the truth of the accusation that the two Cook daughters, Ginny and Rose, level at their father, the villainous Larry Cook, king—like his ancestor Lear—of a glorious 1000 acres of prime Iowa farmland.

Several years later, however, armed with doubt created by a legion of detractors, many of them leading professionals in analysis, neurology, and psychology, I found it more difficult to accept Ginny Cook's sudden realization of what may have happened between herself and her father more than a decade before. Now, with this summer's release of a motion picture based on *A Thousand Acres*, it will be very interesting to see what Hollywood does with Ginny's realization of the incest, an event which stands at the very heart of this novel's major conflict.

The critical question which interests me, however, is how our society's reexamination of repressed memory may affect our estimation of the novel's strength. Should the distinguished panel who awards the Pulitzer, armed now with the newest critical theories, reconvene to evaluate the merits of the novel? Should *A Thousand Acres* wear some ignominious asterisk in the listings of former winners of the Pulitzer? Or, on the other hand, is our second-guessing this book, a product of its time, quite unfair? These are the interesting questions.

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A bit of a plot summary is in order here. In *A Thousand Acres*, Larry Cook, an aging widower known in Zebulon County, Iowa, as a master farmer, decides quite impulsively that with his retirement he will split his substantial farm between his three daughters, two of whom live on land he owns. His youngest daughter, a lawyer in Des Moines, demurs from his offer, just as Cordelia, in the first act of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, refuses to swoon about her father's good graces in the same fashion her treacherous sisters had only moments before. (Smiley has been very candid in her discussion of the similarities between the two plots; *Acres* is, in fact, the same story, updated, reset, and, most importantly, told, in fine postmodern fashion, from the point of view of Lear's evil daughters, General and Regan.)

That Larry Cook is a bully and a scoundrel, that he has abused his daughters physically, that he has expectations of their attention that go beyond what is human or what is just, is obvious in the story. At the same time, of course, he is highly esteemed within the community, a man who has farmed wisely, and who now, as a result of his diligence and as a witness to his character, rules his estimable domain. From the outset, Smiley makes

him ugly, the private man behind the public face, a father no one would care to live with—domineering, callous, despicably sexist. Rose, Larry Cooks' second daughter, quotes her father talking about her sister's childlessness: "According to Daddy, it's almost too late to breed her. Ask him. He'll tell you all about sows and heifers and things drying up and empty chambers. It's a whole theoretical system."

Rose does not need therapy to call up her own horrifying childhood memories. She claims to remember exactly what happened and when, and hates her father with such intensity that, in essence, she never really frees herself from his abuse. On her deathbed, she says to her sister, "We're going to be angry until we die. It's the only hope."

Her sister, Ginny, the narrator of the story, is a woman much less driven to hate than her sister; she is more prone to a close examination of the truth and even some judiciousness toward the family in general and their father in particular. It's Ginny who, initially at least, has denied the memories, even when Rose reveals and unequivocally maintains incest did occur—and to both of them. Characteristically, and convincingly I might add, Ginny is overwhelmed by her sister's revelation and refuses to believe until she revisits her childhood bedroom, where the images are freed from the custody of her own defensive memory: "Lying [on her childhood bed] I knew that he had been in there to me, that my father had lain with me on that bed, that I had looked at the top of his head, at his balding spot in the brown grizzled hair That was the only memory I could endure before I jumped out of bed with a cry."

What follows from this realization is, just as in *Lear*, the gradual but inevitable dissolution of the Cook family and the loss of the family farm/kingdom. Rose leaves her husband for the neighbor, Jess, a late 60s war resistor who has recently returned home to Iowa; Pete, her husband, dies in an accident that looks for all the world and likely is a suicide. Ginny leaves her husband after a fling with Jess herself, not so much because of that affair but because of her new understanding of the Cook family's painful deceptions, lies to which she's been a victim for all of

her years, a pattern of life which Ty, her husband, seems more than willing to continue in order to secure the land he worships and the farm he will come heir to.

Eventually, Rose dies of the cancer that had already disfigured her before the novel's action began. Larry Cook dies of a heart attack. Caroline, the youngest sister, adamantly refuses to believe the truth Ginny and Rose claim to know, choosing instead a naive perspective Ginny thinks typical of life in Zebulon County: "I think things generally are what they seem to be!" Caroline tells her. "I think that people are basically good, and sorry to make mistakes, and ready to make amends!"

A Thousand Acres is a dark and brooding book, ponderous yet powerfully memorable; but like *Lear*, it is not always a joy to read.

How central is the validity of repressed memory to the novel's most significant themes? Very much so. It's Ginny's realization of the truth of Rose's accusations that enables her to break through the horrors of the stultifying patriarchal world she has lived in blindly for so many years. It's Ginny's belief in Rose's memories that creates the revulsion she feels at her husband's refusal to acknowledge the deception all around them, and that leads finally to the end of her marriage. It's Ginny's acceptance of the truth of her abuse that allows her to leave Zebulon County and the 1000 acres that could have been hers alone. On the day she discovers her being a victim of her father's abuse, she says, "My new life, yet another new life, had begun"

So what do we do with a powerful work of fiction whose premise, in the years following the publication of the novel, is significantly undermined by critical thought discounting the validity of "repressed memory" which is at its core?

We could simply throw the novel out. One could build an argument that such a major flaw in the conception of the novel is an indication of a weak understanding of the complexity of human nature. We could rescind the Pulitzer. If an author does not or will not exert the kind of exacting study required to accomplish the novel's infrastructure, how can we trust him or her to know or deliver the truth elsewhere?

Such an attitude, in addition to being reactionary, dismisses the quality of the work for what may be a major—but not fatal—error. There are, after all, other reasons to admire *A Thousand Acres*, and, as I've already tried to say, incest—and the repressed memory which is its only proof—is *not* the major theme the author is investigating. Jane Smiley's concern is not to study the way in which we react to memories so horrifying that even without our will we bury them beneath practical concerns and thereby avoid their reality. That Ginny Cook discovers her having been abused by her father is, in essence, only a step, albeit an important step, in her spirit's liberation.

Besides, there is more to celebrate in the accomplishment of the novel than there is reason to denigrate its achievement on the basis of our newly discovered doubts. There is, first of all, the manner by which the novel helps us understand the nuances of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a play replete with powerful themes concerning justice, family, fatherhood, women, nature, and the experience of old age. What *Acres* displays, if nothing else, is how complex a tragedy *King Lear* actually is, how deep its plunge into the nature of our human suffering. The novel's critical connection to *Lear* is, in itself, a reason to read the book.

Secondly, the novel, like all good fiction, presents the reader with an opportunity to entertain questions about ideas—the problems of patriarchy, of our exploitation of the land, of familial love, of sin and forgiveness. The incredible enslavement to hate which Rose exhibits in the novel, a hate born from the hideous sins of her father, offers the Christian reader especially an opportunity to understand the difficulty of giving full and true forgiveness to very real horror. When Rose refuses to reconcile and dies, instead, in hate, we understand her sin in not deliberately seeking reconciliation, yet we sympathize powerfully with her because we know the depth of her pain.

Third, the path of Ginny's own change in the novel, like *King Lear*'s, is forward, a progression. She does learn something, just as Lear does, and what they both learn is substantively the same lesson. Just as Lear's flight into madness was, for him, essential to confront his own moral blindness, so also Ginny must undergo a psychic hell to grow in her understanding of herself and her world.

Early in the novel she claims that her "only hope" was to understand her father, something her mother couldn't help her with, she says, because her mother died so young, long before she could have "presented us to him as only a man, with habits and quirks and preferences, before she could diminish him in our eyes enough for us to understand him. I wish we had understood him."

At the end of the novel, in the wake of the total dissolution of the family and the loss of the farm, all Ginny has is what she claimed to have been seeking: an understanding of her father. What she

What should we do with a powerful work whose premise is undermined by critical thought, discounting what is at its core?

sees but does not excuse in his sin is their shared dark humanity. In the process of the story, Ginny, prompted by what she sees as Rose's selfish disregard in her taking Jess as a lover, is so hateful that she plots Rose's death. And although that event is never accomplished, what Ginny comes to understand long after she's set the jar of poisoned meat aside is that she too is capable of evil. This sin she's come to see in herself enables her to understand the sin she knows in her father, even if she can't forgive him:

I can't say that I forgive my father, but now I can imagine what he probably chose never to remember—the goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self that must have seemed, when he wandered around the house late at night after working and drinking, like the very darkness.

It is this realization, in the final paragraph of the novel, which most clearly enables Ginny to move on. It is a self-realization in the terms of traditional Christian doctrine, for what the catechism indicates as being central to an understanding of redemption, a firm grasp of our own sinful condition, Ginny discovers in her self—this goad of evil.

This realization, the thrust of the novel itself—even without reference to the specific sin of incest or the reliability of repressed memory—makes *A Thousand Acres* one of those rare books whose reach extends into the darkness of our deepest conceptions about who we think we are and what we might be. At the end, this movement toward reconciliation, a reconciliation that, while far from complete is at least begun, is a mark, I believe, of Ginny's triumph and the novel's wisdom.

Although the reality of Ginny's abuse is fundamental to the story, but not crucial, the "belief" we have in the felt life of the novel is somewhat undercut by the distrust of repressed memory that has arisen since the publication of the novel—specifically, in the novel itself, our own fear that Ginny's memory is creating images that never existed. In realistic fiction, the ability to create life that substantially approximates our perception of the way things are is paramount. The doubt cast by Smiley's reliance on the validity of repressed memory, therefore, *does* affect our ability to verify the work via our own experience.

While the novel is not "about" incest, in the way we might say some made-for-TV-movie might be "about" sexual abuse, incest is crucial to its thematic core. The central issue of the novel is the relationship Smiley works out between the way we use what we believe to own—in this case, rich Iowa soil—and the way we use whatever else we think we own. What Smiley made clear in a 1991 Iowa Humanities Lecture is her belief that Western culture has a particularly noxious understanding of the word *ownership*: "ownership," she says, "drives out relationship." She claims "we live in a culture that not only privileges ownership over relationship but imagines relationship itself through the language of ownership, as in a phrase Freud uses to mean making love to a woman—'possessing her as an object.'" In that kind of culture, she explains, "reciprocity, communication, and mutual benefit are driven out, and exploitation takes their place."

The link which exists between Larry Cook's "ownership" of his 1000 acres and the license he takes in assuming he can "possess" his daughters is what Smiley would like to have us understand here. Her view that men especially—and farmers even more particularly—who think they own the

land may well come to believe, as a consequence, that they own their children as well, certainly their women; and that they therefore have the right to abuse them, just as they take the right to abuse their land with chemicals. The incest one comes upon so suddenly in *A Thousand Acres* has been included not as a subject of study but to serve the presentation of Smiley's own views: the inherent evils of Western attitudes toward "ownership," a presentation of the way in which those attitudes exist in a patriarchal society.

I believe that Jane Smiley's uncritical acceptance of repressed memory mars the accomplishment of the novel. Her own unquestioning attitude toward Rose's revelations and Ginny's awakened memory perhaps illustrate that she may have been a bit too concerned about her own agenda here, her arguments about patriarchy, ownership, and possession.

But her desire to preach is manifest only in degrees. I believe, and those college students of mine who have read the novel agree, that her making Larry Cook incestuous—over and above her establishing clearly his propensity for psychic and physical abuse, her making his behavior even more pathological—was really unnecessary.

My students, many of whom come from rural families, found Larry Cook, aside from his incestuous behavior, entirely convincing as a villain: stubborn, dogmatic, and bigoted, prone to violence and abuse, a man made brutish by his enslavement to the way of life his work created. Why shouldn't he be adequate to the task?—his prototype, Lear, does quite well. The terror he inflicts upon the lives of Ginny and Rose Cook is entirely believable even without his abusing them sexually. In other words, she didn't need to make him incestuous in order to make Ginny's own understanding complete.

But would the novel be different without his crime? Yes, undoubtedly. It's quite likely that the novel would never have received the attention it did if it hadn't included what was, of course, a highly controversial subject like incest.

Fiction lives and dies in extremities of behavior, and Smiley shouldn't be faulted for merely overstating the problem. An author like Flannery O'Connor called her characters "grotesques," claiming that she found it necessary to endow

those folks who people her stories with extreme human characteristics that set them apart from ordinary people—caricatures, really, of human traits we recognize in ourselves, albeit in lesser degrees. We can hardly indict Ms. Smiley for, quite frankly, doing what must be done in fiction.

However, the key to understanding O'Connor's successes is knowing that she's not working as devotedly in the genre of realism as Smiley is in *A Thousand Acres*. O'Connor is interested in a particularly moral vision, one which only suggests itself through the use of symbol and image. In short, she is not trying to recreate real life as much as she is to create something closer to the tall tale in order to carry, subtly, her particularly Christian vision. Smiley, on the other hand, is a devoted realist, and the manner by which she recreates the detail of rural life makes those who know life in the country sure she spent her childhood on an Iowa farm. Smiley is a realist, and from beginning to end *Acres* is a realistic story, even though its texture—a new take on an old tale—is thoroughly post-modern.

At the center of what is real here is an incestuous father. One of the difficulties of the novel, it seems to me, is Smiley's inability to create the kind of verisimilitude necessary for us to "believe" Larry Cook. As I've said, my students and I have no trouble believing his abusive patriarchal behavior, but I have trouble "believing" his sexual abuse of his daughters, perhaps—like Ginny—because I don't know him better than I do.

Why not? Our ability to "understand" fictional characters—to "believe" them—is created when we verify their humanity, when we tell ourselves that those characters could well be real. That verification is dependent on both writer and reader—the author's ability to create felt life, and our ability to perceive it. We recognize the truth of the life presented in fiction when we recognize the character's attributes as, at least in part, our own.

Good fiction, for better or worse, requires us to animate the innocent, as well as the murderer in each of us. We need to find within ourselves the requisite human urges and feelings to verify the credibility, the verisimilitude of the characters. Thus, readers play a significant role in the "believability" of fiction. Murder is not uncommon in our society, nor, obviously, is the hate that generates it. Adultery, one might argue, is not only

condoned but even promoted by the media, and few of us are immune to sexual attraction, even outside of marriage. We can "understand" some sins quite easily because we recognize their emotional sources in ourselves. One of the remarkable characteristics of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is her ability to make us "believe" that a woman could kill her own children rather than have them suffer the horrors of slavery the way she had herself. The success of that novel is based powerfully on Morrison's ability to create a character so vividly that her horrifying act seems understandable and even somehow legitimate.

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But incest is sin of a different nature. It is, here as in most cultures, a taboo. Making an incestuous character "believable" is a most difficult task for any writer, since most readers simply have no access to the truly grotesque pathological motivations that prompt it. I'm not altogether sure that what Toni Morrison did for infanticide, Jane Smiley could do for incest.

Perhaps she understood that, perhaps she didn't. What she does in the novel, however, is bring us into the world of incest and ask us to suspend our disbelief, or our own naiveté—not to understand the character of Larry Cook but instead to bear witness to her theories about patriarchy, about *King Lear*, and about the ramifications of Western conceptions of ownership. The characters are flattened and abused for purposes of an idea, a theory, gender politics, and a deft game played upon the shape and substance of *King Lear*. In *Burning Down the House*, Charles Baxter's very recent collection of essays on the nature of fiction, he writes, "Somewhat in the manner of other naturalistic narratives, *A Thousand Acres* causes its characters to behave like mechanisms, under obscure orders." And there lies the weakness of the novel, a weakness much more clearly

manifest by the revisionist appraisals of repressed memory.

If that is true, then how could *A Thousand Acres* win the coveted Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1989? Certainly politics, sexual politics, plays a role. In a November, 1995, *Atlantic* article whose title, "Making the Incest Scene," amply states its own thesis, Katie Roiphe, writes, "Sexual abuse, of course, is everywhere splashed across the culture, wept about on talk shows, endlessly reported on the news. And writers of fiction have obligingly followed along; incest has become our latest literary vogue." Roiphe goes on to call Smiley's use of the incest theme a "cheap trick" and "politically trendy." Judges, like all of us, were, sad to say, swept along in the tide of victim-culture.

So what do we do with this novel? Roiphe says that in *A Thousand Acres* "incest works as a kind of bargain-basement epiphany." How, finally, do we estimate the worth of Jane Smiley's celebrated Pulitzer Prize winner, flawed as it is by her tacit acceptance of a phenomenon more faddish than real?

Several years ago, when I was teaching *A Thousand Acres*, my daughter was reading Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* with a reluctance based not so much on the book as its sheer size—and her opinion that homework should not be required for second-semester high school seniors. I told her that no book in the twentieth century was more instrumental in changing the plight of some of society's most unfortunate. My opinion didn't matter.

She asked me whether or not I knew what kind of book this was—its language, presumably, along with its somewhat racy scenes. I told her I was aware that it wasn't Janette Oke. She was attempting to enlist my ire against the novel in the hopes that I'd not insist on her having to read it. That didn't work either. But a week later, by the time she'd finally pushed her way through the novel, she loved it.

I have never been a Steinbeck aficionado. To me, *Grapes of Wrath* suffers from Steinbeck's uncritical acceptance of the idea that all landowners were horrid villains. What Steinbeck didn't observe was the essential humanity of the landowners, that they might be, like the farm workers, as subject to evil and as simultaneously

capable of good as anyone else in God's creation. The book suffers from its own polemic, in my view, but Steinbeck's error doesn't make the novel unworthy of my daughter's time. What makes *Grapes of Wrath* a great book is not its even-handedness, because it lacks that; what makes it memorable is the story Steinbeck tells to explain injustice to a culture that may not have taken the time to see before—or may well have denied.

To my mind, whether or not we believe the validity of repressed memory, Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* has to be read via the same measure as Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, as a masterpiece, but a flawed masterpiece, a bit too pushy with its agenda, but a novel whose reach is deep and firm, and whose message—and I use that word uncritically—is eminently worth hearing.

That the novel uncritically accepts the validity of Rose's accusations and Ginny's sudden realizations need not be a mark of its failure. What the case against repressed memory can never establish anyway is that incest does not happen, or that sexual abuse is itself little more than a by-product of lively, yet clouded imaginations.

Whether or not we can completely believe the charges that emerge from our friends' repressed memories—or our own—is not something answerable in *A Thousand Acres* or any other work of fiction. That answer will require more than a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. For at the bottom of all the accusation and denial our culture is presently witnessing from the vault of its own memories lies nothing more or less than what Ginny comes to see in herself.

It may be true that this novel does not reach the heights it could, and it may also be true that the reason is Smiley's uncritical acceptance of a "bargain-basement" epiphany to sort out all her problems. Any assessment of the novel's strength has to take into account her poor judgment in using the repressed memory syndrome to buttress the themes of the novel.

But even so, the novel succeeds, because what Ginny comes to understand in her via the trauma of her own pursuit of the truth is not that someone else sinned, someone *else* behaved in a despicable manner, someone else ruined her life. The novel is bigger than its own demerits; Ginny's final realization brings her own soul, her own darkness, into

her understanding of her situation. Beneath the realization is a view of humanity as responsible, not simply recipient. Ginny's lesson is not simply that her father wronged her (as questionable as that view of things may be), but that she, too, as a human being, is capable of great, great sin. To Jane Smiley's credit, Ginny's believing her father's incestuous behavior is not the most powerful epiphany of the novel.

That epiphany comes in the novel's final line, when Ginny realizes that no matter how horrendously she'd been treated by Larry Cook, her own behavior—attempting the murder of her own sister—was no better than his. What Ginny discovers is the darkness of the human heart—not just her father's, but her own as well.

The novel's strength is the realization of human culpability, of the darkness of all of our hearts. That is what Ginny learns in *A Thousand Acres*. And, although I say this grudgingly, human as I am, understanding and believing that truth makes her suffering as well as ours—as it does the suffering of Lear—very much worthwhile.

That kind of recognition begins a process orthodox Christians maintain is crucial to the beginnings of true wisdom—the recognition of sin as a necessary first step toward our reception of divine grace.

Smiley's Iowa novel, *A Thousand Acres*, jumps to answers she too quickly assumed to be valid. But it's a wonderful novel anyway and a great success, sketching out very clearly the precise theme of the first section of The Catechism.