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Thousand Acres and The Bridges of Madison County (Book Reviews)

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laws may appear to promote economic justice by raising living standards of some workers. However, greater injustice may result from setting wages above market clearing levels if firms cannot afford to pay minimum wages or union wages to the least skilled and experienced workers.

This book has much to offer any Christian involved or

A Thousand Acres by Jane Smiley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991). 371 pages, hardcover, \$23. *The Bridges of Madison County* by Robert James Waller (New York: Warner, 1992). 171 pages, hardcover, \$14.45. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Professor of English.

Literarily at least, Iowans have reason to celebrate this summer—and reason for concern. Two novels by Iowa writers, their textures and settings distinctively Iowan, have risen to prominence in the book world. One of them, *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley, was recently awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The other, *The Bridges of Madison County*, a first novel by essayist Robert Waller, a frequent and popular contributor to *Des Moines Sunday Register's* Op-ed pages, was also released. Time-Warner, the book's publisher, thought so highly of it that it gave the book a full-page advertisement in a June issue of *Time*. *Newsweek*, in its September 7 issue, featured *Bridges* as one of those novels whose sales have been surprisingly good because the book has lovingly "hand-sold" by admiring bookstore owners. In September, *Bridges* had risen to number seven on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

Iowans, who often suffer from a kind of second-city mentality with respect to most other states of the union, should take pride in the achievement of these novels, both of which are worth reading.

Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* offers more of a taste of rural life than a week of judging hogs at the State Fair. What is remarkable about this novel, Smiley's ninth book, is that she is able to evoke the nuances of rural life in such detail and with such authenticity that even born-and-bred Iowans will shake their heads in disbelief upon being told that she is not, in fact, a native. Reared in St. Louis, Smiley has spent many years, however, in Iowa, some of them teaching at Iowa State University, and a year or so living in the kind of rural hamlet featured in *Acres*.

If a reader is even remotely interested in a tour of small-town minutiae, *Acres* will undoubtedly please, not only because it offers such wonderful side road passages as an explanation of varying friendly waves one receives from pick-up drivers met randomly on country roads, but also because of the accuracy of manners only implied in the narrative. Women are told, for instance, that nothing really fancy should be packed

interested in business. Some of the suggestions made by the authors are controversial and provide a good stimulus for a discussion to alternative viewpoints. Questions at the end of each chapter encourage discussion of controversial issues. For a balanced, scriptural treatment of business accessible to the nonspecialist, I highly recommend *Business Through the Eyes of Faith*.

along to a pot-luck supper; when they arrive and set down their dishes, they discover none of them has heeded the advice.

This is a long book, not just an afternoon's leisure reading; but the Garrison Keilor factor, the recognition of characteristic rural mannerisms, is strong. There is much to smile at in *A Thousand Acres*, much to shake one's head about, much to feel familiarly embarrassed by. Smiley has obviously done her homework, and the result—as always in good fiction—is authenticity that creates authority, not only for the author, but more importantly for the book itself. Even if Iowa readers don't like the material of the novel, they have to love its texture.

While Ms. Smiley, having achieved the Pulitzer, is undoubtedly staying busy on the lecture circuit, it's unlikely that she'll be nominated for any major awards by the *Farm Journal*. There is as much to lament in this novel as there is to praise, for the image it presents of Iowa life is nothing the state tourist bureau would want promulgated.

Review after review have already alluded to the link between Shakespeare's tragedy of filial regression, *King Lear*, and Smiley's *Acres*. In both works, a well-established father gives up the authority of his reign to his three daughters. In both, dissolution follows relentlessly and pitilessly. *A Thousand Acres* is not quick reading, neither is it easy.

At the center of the novel is Larry Cook, a highly successful farmer who has given all of himself to the establishment and operation of a sprawling farm in a fictional county of north-central Iowa. What is likeable about the man is his indefatigable strength. He has devoted all of his life to the operation he has created, every bit of it; and he is highly respected in the community. He is, in fact, a master farmer. As a human being, however, he is despicable, reminding one of the old Thoreauvian catechism, a man who has become "a tool of his tools." Larry Cook is no longer Man-Farming, Emerson might say, but simply and incorrigibly, farmer.

Mentally imbalanced, a heavy drinker capable of startling rages and incredible mental and physical cruelty, Cook, almost without notice, offers to deed his thousand acres to his three daughters, one of whom is the narrator of this novel, a daughter, unlike the others, who has seemingly devoted most of her life to pleasing this man who cannot be pleased. Another daughter has left the land to become a lawyer in Des Moines. A third, the middle daughter, lives nearby, a victim of cancer, a woman suffering through a marriage that long ago lost its vitality, just as she, long ago, was robbed of her innocence.

Like *Lear*, the gift of rule bestowed upon the daughters is in essence the kiss of death. As if it were a novel by Thomas Hardy, *A Thousand Acres* is the story of a situation that simply grows, page by page, worse and worse and worse—and never gets better.

Ginny, the narrator, charts the course of dissolution. A victim, as is her sister Rose, of incest she has totally blocked out of her mind, Ginny painfully records the family's slow and inevitable demise. Everything falls apart. Rose emerges from a stifling marriage only because her husband kills himself. Ginny's husband abandons her side in her father's unsuccessful attempt to wrest the farm back from his daughters. Eventually, Rose herself dies, and the acres her father has worked so hard to establish and control are lost to the family completely.

It's a novel about the farm crisis of the '80s, in part at least; and it's a novel about incest. It's a novel about Iowa life, too, in many ways—about the pollution wrought by herbicides and insecticides, about power and domination, about the stiff forearm of patriarchy. It's a story about the inability to adapt, to change, and the seemingly inborn propensity to swing out in violence when afraid or angry. It is not a happy book, and the accuracy with which it presents Iowa family life is something readers, especially Iowa readers, will have to measure for themselves.

It is not difficult to be put off by *A Thousand Acres*; and it is not difficult to put the book down. Incest is never easy reading. And although the topic is handled very gently, the whole subject is something many readers, with precious little time, would choose to avoid.

However, this is not just a book about incest, just as it is not *just* a book about the farm crisis, about mismanagement of the land, about inability to change. This is, first and foremost, a story about human beings—not just farmers, but all of us.

While reviewers have often noted its parallels to *Lear* and have frequently remarked about its investigation

of the crime and sin of incest, *A Thousand Acres* is, I believe, about you and me and the heart of darkness.

For at the core of the quest carried on by the narrator, a quest to understand what has happened as the thousand acre kingdom around her vanishes, lies her own quest to understand her father, an understanding that includes, of course, his sin, but doesn't simply stop there.

Larry Cook's wife died young, and Ginny remarks frequently how much she wishes her mother had stayed alive to explain the ways of her father to her. From the very beginning, Ginny locates her possibility of freedom from the past in the mystery that is Larry Cook. She needs somehow to understand him.

Once she discovers her own violation, once Rose makes it clear that both of them were visited at night by their father—and often, Ginny's questions about her father's motivation and character do not change. Angry as she is, petrified by what had happened, shocked that she was able so completely to erase all memory of what had happened, Ginny still doesn't give up on understanding him—not loving him. That's not the point at all. What Larry Cook did to his daughters relieves them, as children, of the responsibility to love him. What remains, however, at least for Ginny (not for Rose) is the mystery of her father's character—what was it in him that made him the way he was?

And the triumph of this book—despite its darkness and its brutality—is that Ginny Cook, victim, comes finally, on the last page of the novel, to see him clearly for the first time. That knowledge comes, in part, from her own reaction to her sister's angry life, to her sister's rejection of her, to her sister's vivid and animating hate. Once Ginny sees the kind of sin and darkness she is herself capable of, she sees at least something of the sin and darkness that existed in the stumbling psyche of a father who violates his own children.

What good is that knowledge, one might ask. By the end of *A Thousand Acres*, Ginny Cook sees the darkness in herself, and her father, and in all of us.

There are two ways readers might react to that knowledge and to the book's strong theme. First, the realization of our sin and darkness is only more depressing. To note that we are all guilty, that we are all capable of wrong, or sin, or brutality even, only makes the reading more stultifying.

But one would hope that Calvinists would read such an ending differently; for the process of salvation, we are told in our catechism and in the Bible, begins with a sometimes wrenchingly acquired knowledge of our own sin.

The redeeming strength of *A Thousand Acres*, or so it seems to me, is that Ginny *can* understand, that she *can* come to some limited but definite knowledge, not only of her father but of herself. What she's been able to do, on the basis of the suffering undergone through the whole story, is piece together a picture of her father's—and her own—sorry brokenness. If the truth does, in fact, make us free, then Ginny, despite her brokenness and her suffering, is liberating herself by her new-found knowledge of her father's humanity.

Scores of Iowans will dislike this novel for the portrait it presents of a decadent, evil farm family—its suggestion that such a situation is not so rare as one might think. But scores of readers may not notice the most significant quest of the novel—the quest Ginny undertakes for some understanding of her father—and the fact that by the end that quest is made successful by her diligence.

A Thousand Acres is a deep and dark book, one that will not fall from the soul as easily as an airport novel may drop from a sleepy reader in a shady hammock. Smiley has a wonderful future ahead of her as a novelist. This novel deserves the Pulitzer. And at least this reviewer, an Iowan, is proud of it.

Waller's *The Bridges of Madison County* is much lighter, an afternoon's entertainment, and a plot that's nowhere near as fresh or striking. What's more, the whole story is telegraphed from the beginning. Nothing comes as a surprise in this story—the story of an affair whose emotional highs reach, if the author is to be believed, as close as humanity ever comes to the eternal.

This is romance, but not plain and simple. That the affair happens to a woman, is, of course, politically correct. If the protagonist were a man, and not a farm wife suffering from ennui, the novel would never have been published.

Which is not to say the novel is not a good read. While I hesitate spelling out the intricate plotting of Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, reviewing the entire plot of Waller's *Bridges of Madison County* gives nothing away.

While a dutiful, loving husband, accompanied by his children, brings a prize hog to the fair, his wife, left alone on the farm, falls victim to a breathtaking, but momentary, love affair, a few days so remarkable and sublime that those moments write themselves forever on her consciousness—and his. This story celebrates physical and emotional love, worships it, in fact, holds it up as something—maybe the best thing—humanity can achieve.

The strength of the novel, obviously, is not in the

plot line. Love triangles like this one have existed for centuries. That men can be cheated on is no more surprising than that women can be victims of the same intrigue. What Waller does nicely is take us through a story whose outcome we've known from the opening pages of the book—and there is some joy in that.

It is a fact, of course, that many of Shakespeare's plots were not his. They were, instead, borrowed. In fact, many of the theater-goers in Elizabethan England knew even before they entered the theater that Macbeth was going to die. The joy they wanted from Shakespeare's presentation was not in the literal outcome of the most basic plot, not that at all. What they enjoyed instead was how this new storyteller arranged the facts. To them it wasn't the end itself that was the glory, but the means.

One receives from Waller's book the same kind of joy. There are no surprises, no plot turns. What is remarkable about Waller's delivery of the story is the way in which he keeps us interested, even though we know this affair is going to end in a kind of Platonic, supernal world. In Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, the real core of Ginny's dilemma—and her power over it—is secured through an intimately detailed narrative that culminates powerfully on the final page of the novel. Reaching it, the way Ginny Cook reaches her understanding of her father's darkness, means understanding the novel. Waller's book, on the other hand, entertains not by its end, but by its means.

In its celebration of love outside of marriage, Waller's novel certainly isn't surveying any new ground. In its adulation of the sublime height reached by this emotionally-starved housewife and her artist/photographer lover, it is, today, quite derivative, in fact. Its worship of human love amounts, really, to idolatry.

But if you're strong enough to realize that this novel is little more than romance, then you might enjoy Waller's *Bridges of Madison County* anyway, as I did, for its craft. It is not particularly graphic, certainly not as vivid in its portrayal of sexuality as it could be. Like *Dr. Zhivago*, for instance, this novel's values are superficial and obviously sinful, but they are human; perhaps the book's appeal tells us more about our culture than it does about ourselves—if the two can be separated.

These are both interesting novels, but Smiley's is vastly more difficult and, perhaps consequently, immeasurably superior. Waller's *Bridges of Madison County*, like the event it celebrates, is a moment's pleasure; Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, on the other hand, stays with a reader, hauntingly, even chillingly.

One final note of sadness. In both novels, Iowa men do not fare well. They lack passion, except for their work. They show little, if any, ability to understand the needs of the women with whom they live. They can be well-meaning, but they appear domineering and brutal at worst, Old McDonald bumpkins at best.

Others will have to assess the accuracy of this evaluation—whether or not what Smiley, a woman, and Waller, a man, are suggesting about Iowa men, farmers in particular, has any currency.

Obviously, however, what is true is that both of these books continue to flesh out a paradigm of contemporary life almost overworked in recent years: that of deeply feeling, strongly sympathetic women being dominated and often emotionally, if not physically, violated by powerful, unfeeling men. One sees and

reads it everywhere—in one of last year's surprise movie hits, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, as well as another recent Pulitzer Prize novel, *The Last Confederate Woman Tells All*.

But there's reason to be proud. Ever since the turn of the century America has enjoyed brilliantly accomplished regionalistic writing from the hands of its Southern writers—Wolfe, Faulkner, O'Connor, Welty and a host of others. Perhaps with Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and, to a lesser extent, Waller's *Bridges of Madison County*, American readers may become acquainted with a whole new world—the American Midwest.

Midwesterners—Iowans in particular—could do worse than the start we've received from these two novels.

The Environment and the Christian: What can we learn from the New Testament? edited by Calvin B. De Witt (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1991. 156 pages, paperback. \$7.95. Reviewed by Delmar Vander Zee, Professor of Biology.

This book, one in a growing genre of literature by Christians responding to the global environmental crisis, is an important book because of its focus and its rigorous contents. Lynn White's broadside, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," (*Science* 155:1203-1207), provided the wakeup call to the Christian community. A key response to L. White was that his criticism rested on a misreading of mainly one Old Testament text, Gen. 1:28, and that this Old Testament dominion passage cannot be narrowly interpreted outside other biblical contexts. Much has been found in the OT to support a biblical view and an obedient response toward the global environmental crisis. But, what of the New Testament? Is the NT silent? These questions were behind the Au Sable Forum (Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, Mancelona, MI) that called together several NT scholars in the summer of 1989 to address the question in this book's subtitle.

Arising out of a forum, each chapter of the book was written by one person who heard the other presentations and subsequent discussions before submitting a final copy. That integrative process plus the carefully drafted introduction and epilogue by the editor, Calvin De Witt, makes the book very readable and coherent.

In the "Introduction" a framework is laid by reviewing seven degradations of creation (land conversion and habitat destruction, species extinction, land degradation, resource conversion and waste production, global toxification, alteration of planetary exchange, human and cultural degradation). These are not a pedantic litany of physical and biological prob-

lems, but rather a whole view of the global crisis divided into manageable categories. The editor discusses briefly how each degradation ought to be viewed biblically, and directs readers to later chapters by references and questions.

In the opening chapter, "Christ as creator and redeemer," Loren Wilkinson wades in with the NT concept of Christ's lordship. Is he both a cosmic and personal Christ? How are these related? To get at these questions the author explores the OT meanings and creation contexts of "spirit," "law," and "wisdom," as seen, for example, in Gen. 1, Ps. 104, and Prov. 8. He connects this with the NT and its presentation of Christ as Lord of the cosmos (John 1:1-3 and John 3:16). This incarnate cosmic Christ came to be an atonement, understood as the renewal of creation as well as satisfaction and example. Wilkinson argues that if atonement is seen only as satisfaction and example, it should not be surprising to find Christian ethics that neglect human involvement with the creation. Only the view of atonement as renewal of creation takes into full account the cosmic lordship of Christ.

The next major NT theme addressed in the book is "Christ as the second Adam." This theme is developed by Ronald Manahan, who probes deeply into the meaning and role of the first Adam from the OT and Hebrew tradition. From the key NT passages in I Cor. 15 and Rom. 5 the analogy is made between the first Adam and Christ, the second Adam. Is this just an interesting theological exercise in comparing two biblical figures? No, argues the author; the fall