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On Music in Her Mountain Novels: An Interview with Lee Smith

Carmen Rueda Ramos
Universitat Rovira i Virgili
carmen.rueda@urv.cat

Lee Smith has been writing fiction for more than forty years. The renowned author of eleven novels, a novella, and four collections of short stories to date, she is a prolific Appalachian writer whose work has been translated into a number of languages. Recently distinguished as a member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers, Lee Smith has also received numerous writing awards, among them the Lifetime Literary Achievement Award from the State of Virginia (2010), the Thomas Wolfe Award (2010), induction into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame (2009), the Southern Book Critics Circle Award for *The Last Girls* (2002) and the Academy Award in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1999), all in nearly a decade. Her ability to capture Appalachian voices and create stories rooted deeply in the folklore of her mountain region has become a hallmark of her fiction. Mountain musicians, like Mack Stiltner in *Black Mountain Breakdown* (1980) and Little Luther Wade in *Oral History* (1983), populated her earlier fiction. The author also includes references to popular mountain ballads like "Come All Ye Fair and Tender Ladies" in the epigraph of *Oral History,* and later even uses part of it for the title of one of her best novels, *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988). But the two novels where the author delves most deeply into the theme of music are *The Devil's Dream* (1992) and *On Agate Hill* (2006), her latest work, where she explores the relationship between music and literature from a broader perspective.

The following interview took place on May 26, 2011, at her home in Hillsborough, NC, during my time as a SAAS-Fulbright Scholar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I was researching contemporary Appalachian Literature.

CRR: *The theme of Appalachian music is one particularly dear to your heart. Why is that so?*

LS: For me it is entirely personal. I grew up in Grundy, in Buchanan County (Southwest Virginia), hearing Appalachian music on every side all the time. To me, that is just the sound of my childhood. It is very beautiful. It corresponds in my mind to the natural beauty of the mountains and then to all that big family that I had then and that I loved. There was always music out there, and there was always somebody playing music. Music was very much a part of every single thing we did. It was like the soundtrack of my childhood. My childhood was also filled with stories because all of these people —the men

and the women— were big storytellers. Nobody was a reader much or a learned person, but they could really tell a story and every single piece of information was just presented as a story. I just grew up hearing a story and the stories were completely interwoven with the music, which is appropriate too because Appalachian music so often is telling a story. It is very narrative. I just grew up with it being so much a part of me, who I was, the way I was learning language, and the way I was learning how to interpret and express the world. It was completely personal. It is not something I came to later in life.

CRR: *Are there any musicians in your family?*

LS: There are, yeah. In fact, there were two twins, both of them named Bill Smith way back. Blind Bill Smith was a kind of a barrelhouse piano player. This Bill Smith made furniture and he just played all over the county. He was always getting too drunk and always falling in and out of jail. He was my great-uncle, actually. And my granddaddy, who was his brother, was always the one who had to go get him and my grandmother wouldn't let him spend the night in their house because he was stealing stuff [*laughs*]. But he was apparently quieter and he typed a whole lot of letters to my granddaddy, Earl Smith, because he had a little Braille typewriter. Anyway, we were not a singing family. But my best friend, Martha Sue Owens, and her father, Herbert Owens, were and they were just wonderful, wonderful. He was like two houses down and so he would take us to where he would go off to play music. There were lots and lots of people that we knew really well, cousins and all, other than my immediate family [*laughs*].

CRR: *Why is music so important in Appalachia? Is it because it tells the history of mountain people as a distinct group in the South and in America?*

LS: That's probably true. It does do that. But I think that is someone else's interpretation from a more learned distance, you know, from an academic or sociological distant point. I think that music is so important because, for one thing, it was a survival culture. I mean, it was a very poor culture early on. The one thing everybody had was music because the songs were handed. Not everybody was literate, knew how to read and write, but the music was free and you didn't have to be able to read or know anything in particular to know a lot of songs or to be able to play great music. It was just simply pervasive. It expressed all these very deep and very honest emotions that the people themselves were having or going through —whether these were religious songs, with a very primitive view of God and the desperate heart-felt belief in the afterlife, or whether these were love songs. But the most important thing this music is about was work and money, as well as the land itself. So it was simply an expression —really a literary expression— of who we were. Also it was a way early on to remember the history because there were so many songs that were telling stories so that people could remember, for example, the death of Floyd Collins that inspired so many songs. I think it comes out really, at that early point, of the lack of a reading culture. It's more like the troubadour, that sense of history in store and being in the collective memory. And, of course, it's mnemonic. You can remember a song.

CRR: *In her 1905 book,* The Spirit of the Mountains*, Emma Bell Miles said that "[t]he music of the Southern mountaineer is not only peculiar, but, like himself, peculiarly American" (147). She even expressed her hope that Appalachian music might "take a high place among the world's great schools of expression" (171). My question is, was she prophetic somehow?*

LS: She certainly was, yes. It's interesting that she perceived that because so many of us growing up there were being, as my friend Pam used to say, "raised to leave". But she was able to perceive what was really there, so that's great. She was really prophetic. But I think this is part of a whole national trend and the kind of standardization that we have entered into now, particularly with these new media where everything is national immediately. I think it has made us all treasure what is particularly local and particularly ours because we see it threatened.

CRR: *Emma Bell Miles considered the compositions of mountaineers in song, proverb and story, including ballads and rhymes, as "literature" (172). Do you also view these Appalachian oral forms of expression as literature or as cultural expressions deeply interrelated?*

LS: I view a lot of it as literature, absolutely, particularly the early ballads. I see the difference between them and Robert Burns, so to speak [*laughs*]. But I think she's right. I read her a long time ago but she had a certain education that she brought back to her appreciation of the mountains. She was local. Well, that's the thing. It's very hard to adequately appreciate your own culture if you're right in the middle of it and you've never been anywhere else or learned anything beyond it, because that's you there and that's all you know. But if you can get something that gives you a sort of a distance so you can have an aesthetic, that distance makes all the difference so that you can perceive and articulate it. And she did it so well in that book. I mean, Emma Bell Miles was quite a writer herself.

CRR: *You mention Emma Bell Miles as one of the sources you consulted to write* The Devil's Dream*. Has she influenced your work in any way?*

LS: It's hard to say because I have read so much over all the years. When I first read her, she influenced my work immensely, enormously. It was at that point that I had already begun writing and cataloguing, writing down and saving all the remarks of my family and the people around the home and taping them, but I didn't know what I was gonna do with it. And then to come across someone like Emma Bell Miles and see her own beautiful writing about my life and about my own culture was just ticking to me. Jean Richie's book, *Singing Family of the Cumberlands* (1955), is again beautiful writing — this appreciation of what was here, what was all around us. So those were among the first, and they make impressions that are big impressions. James Still was another one although he didn't deal so specifically with the music, but as a storyteller. He was writing literature, simple mountain stories, out of this stuff. So it's very moving, shocking and inspiring for me.

CRR: *Have you been inspired by the way other writers, like Eudora Welty or even Virginia Woolf, used music and musical elements in their fiction?*

LS: Oh, yeah. Eudora Welty has been an immense influence to me always, in general, and not only the musical elements. It's interesting to me that she too has a mountain past. Did you know that? She went up to West Virginia every summer to visit her grandmother and her five banjo-playing uncles. You hear a lot of music coming through in her work and it's very important to her. And it's also very important to the quality of her writing, to her prose, because she has this perfect pitch, the perfect musical prose. Also, her stories often are more like tales or songs than they are like stories. I think there is a difference between a tale and a story, and hers are more in that mountain tradition of the tale and the song. It's not just conflict, complication, and resolution —that's a story. It's just this happening and this happening and this happening, and there's a sort of a repetition, a rhythm. She writes in that tradition and she was very important to me. Also, there's often a lot of mythology going on in Eudora Welty, and you find that same kind of thing in the ballads and the mountain music. There's folk belief as a part of daily life. Like 'Shower of Gold', anything can happen: the witch can come in daily life and the mountain stories. So there is a definite resonance there with her. As to Virginia Woolf, I don't know. As a young writer and as a student at college, I've always absolutely adored Virginia Woolf. But I think, for one thing, because I'd go toward impressionism, impressionistic writing or impressionism in art kind of naturally, because it's hard for me to see and grasp and express the whole. I like to make the reader work a little, put it together. And somehow the way Woolf writes just hit me, in a way, like Faulkner. I mean, Woolf, Faulkner and Eudora Welty are all just huge influences, the major influences.

CRR: *Now let's talk about your novels. Apart from* The Devil's Dream *and more recently* On Agate Hill*, you have used references to traditional Appalachian ballads and musicians in your earlier fiction. Music has been a constant in many of your novels.*

LS: It has. Oh, absolutely. I think if you tried to take the music out of my books, there wouldn't be any books left. I mean, it's a huge influence on me and it's the soundtrack. When I'm writing, I more or less gather material, plan what I am going to write and do all this pre-writing. But when I sit down to actually write, it's like I go into a little trance and I hear the story. I guess that's one reason why I so often have first-person narrators because often they are telling their own story. But whether they are or not, I actually hear the story and usually there is music along with it. It's the whole shebang —it's like there's a film, there's a story, there's the whole sound of the story and the course of the story that's in my mind. And I am just writing it down as it happens. So it's all a part of it for me.

CRR: *Let me ask you first about* The Devil's Dream. *In the past, the fiddle was often called 'the Devil's box'. What is it that made fiddle music so devilish?*

LS: [*Laughs*] Because I think it makes you want to get up and dance, and dancing is somehow sexual in a very closed-down kind of life. In certain kinds of churches, you

weren't allowed to dance. In fact, many women had to sit on opposite sides of the church and all. So the fiddle so often led to a bodily expression and lascivious behavior —all these things that were forbidden in certain ways, that were a threat to this very narrow construction of a family or a marriage.

CRR: *This is a novel about music and musicians. Can you explain Lucie Queen's uneasy feeling, her "terrible sense of loss" (1992: 124), after singing their songs to strangers during the Bristol Sessions?*

LS: Yeah, it's funny that you would pick that up because after that book came out, Vivian Mason wrote me a letter about that scene, which had made her cry. She was trying to figure it out, why she took it so personally, and why it made her cry. It made me cry too when she said it, but not when I wrote it down. I think it's because your sharing something which has been so private and so personal means that now any old stranger can hear it, can hear what has meant the most to you, and can just appropriate it. It's no longer yours.

CRR: *Is it like giving it away?*

LS: Yeah, you're losing it because you're giving it away. Of course, the problem is that music is performance and it is to be heard. It's like writing something and putting it in your drawer, instead of trying to have somebody else read it. But there is something very sad about taking something that has just meant so much to you and then sharing it. You have a sense —and Lucie had a sense there— that it would immediately be snapped up, which it was, and it would immediately belong to the world.

CRR: *In this novel you fictionalize the history of country music. You go back from the ballads and hymns sung in the rural world of the Appalachian mountains, the early commercialization of hillbilly music in urban areas, to all of its later derivations (rockabilly, etc). And the novel ends with the apex of country music's popularity in the 1970s and with a return to roots, to the origin. Can you comment on that?*

LS: Yeah, I really saw the structure of this novel like a record, like an album —those big records that we used to have before CDs— in which all the different family members had their own cut, and everybody had his or her song on it. I saw it as a circle. I saw it as a circular thing. So at the very end, Katie Cocker was being interviewed by the lady in Nashville and then going back to her roots, their roots, where it all started.

CRR: *To me* The Devil's Dream *tells more than just the history of country music or what some people even call 'all-American music'. In this novel, you are also telling the process of what John Egerton called "The Southernization of America" (1974) and reminding Americans of the Appalachian origins of country music. Would you agree to that?*

LS: Hmmm, that wasn't what I had articulated, what I had consciously realized I was doing. But looking at that book, I think now that it does do that. I mean, that novel could not have imagined Faith Hill, Garth Brooks and the degree of commercialization

or success —popular, mainstream, worldwide success— that country music has had since. Take Dolly Parton and her own very humble beginnings, and now she's a complete worldwide phenomenon. This book didn't even quite imagine that that could happen.

CRR: *It just struck me that you decided to finish this long, long period of history right in the middle of the 1970s, which is this really important moment in the history of country music. Then I read about John Egerton and this idea of the Southernization of America, and I thought this was all related somehow.*

LS: Oh, it is related. It is related. It was at the point where suddenly we were being appreciated. I remember one thing and it's true. My publisher did not get this book at all. They just thought, well, who would want to read about country music? But as my editor was a good friend, she published it and they were still thinking like that because they lived in New York and didn't know anything. But at the same time, the publisher really just didn't do anything when the book came out. You see, my editor, who I loved so much, had cancer then and she could get it published, but she couldn't really have a big say anymore. They were keeping her on but she was ill. So when that book came out though, and they said who cares about country music, and we will just print a few copies and see what happens, Garth Brooks was on the cover of *Time* magazine! He was a huge phenomenon, a huge national success, a worldwide success. At that time, the big hats and Tim McGraw and this whole thing had gone national, as had NASCAR, as had Dolly. All that stuff was really happening right then. So the book itself did end right at that point and was published right at that point, right before it all became such a huge deal.

CRR: *I read somewhere that balladeer and novelist Sheila Kay Adams inspired the beginning of* The Devil's Dream *with the tragic story of fiddler Kate Malone. Tell me about it.*

LS: I knew Sheila early on because I would teach these workshops for the state of North Carolina, that they still have, to reward good teachers in the public teaching system. When I began to do research for *The Devil's Dream*, I knew enough to know that many of the very earliest ballads had been collected for the first time by Cecil Sharp up in Madison County, in Hot Springs. There was a group of famous ballad singers up there, and somebody told me that one of the younger members, Sheila, was singing publicly. Then, strangely enough, I was teaching at the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT), just teaching creative writing as an enrichment course, a weekend seminar type of thing, to pamper deserving teachers and she was one of them. She thought we were doing writing exercises, directive writing from prompts and so on, and she wrote this incredible piece about going hunting for ginseng with her granny. And everybody was like "Oh, my God". Then, she started just writing out the story. She was always such a great storyteller. She would tell stories in her public performances as well as sing. And she sang for us all and told stories. But she turned out to be —and this is rare— just as good at writing them as not, so she started writing them down and she would send them to me. So, finally, she got

enough for a book that UNC press published. It's called *Come Go Home with We* (1995), and I wrote the introduction. So I did get a lot of those earlier ideas from Sheila because I went up to visit with her and I stayed with her, and then we went up to visit with her granny Dale Norton and all of them up in Sodom. That's how I got the material from the early ballad part of the book.

CRR: *Right, and I think the title of that collection of short stories or sketches is a line in an old ballad. I can't remember which one, but it's a line in an old ballad...*

LS: It is. That's why she chose it.

CRR: *Another musician, Alice Gerrard, and her song 'Agate Hill' also proved to be pivotal to inspire you your new novel,* On Agate Hill. *Can you tell me about that?*

LS: Yes, I have loved Alice's singing all my life. I was living in Chapel Hill and she was up in Galax, and then she moved down here. So I got to meet her and we have been friends for many, many years. When she sings, she's got that old traditional sound, like nobody's business. Anyway, she had a new CD coming out with many original tunes on it, as well as her versions of some older ones and some fragmentary older things she had finished. So she asked me to write the liner notes, and I did, and the song 'Agate Hill' was one of the songs. She wrote it after her mother died, and it was the most haunting song. It just kept going through my mind as I wrote the liner notes. Meanwhile, we had just moved into this house and I was becoming very interested in Civil War letters and correspondents. That was just for my own pleasure really, reading a lot of that, and that 'Agate Hill' ballad just kept coming back and coming back.

CRR: *How did* On Agate Hill *begin then? With a character, an image, a voice, a particular emotion, or a song?*

LS: It began with the song 'Agate Hill', which somehow kept resounding in my mind, as I was reading all this Civil War and reconstruction material. It was about a lost world, and the song itself was written out of grief and loss. I don't know why but it just kept playing in the back of my mind when I was reading all this stuff, and at a certain point I realized I was gonna write a novel. Then I just started writing the novel, but it was always absolutely in the center of it because that whole time period is so emotional. There's never been a body of literature —and I really say Civil War literature like the letters, journals and diaries kept and so on— that has been so charged with emotion. I think everybody was aware that they were living through circumstances that had never occurred in this country before and would never happen again, that their lives were significant and could end at any minute. They did not know that their lives were being changed utterly, and that's why they were writing to set this down. So this is the most emotional kind of reading and writing that has ever occurred. Oh, I don't know if I would have ever written the novel if I hadn't heard that song 'Agate Hill'! Somehow it really became a part of what I was doing and the soundtrack for *On Agate Hill*. It was all I was ever going to name it.

CRR: *Music is a powerful vehicle for our emotions and transcendence. It has the ability to empower us and evoke memories, and it also has immensely healing powers. What function has music had for you in this novel?*

LS: Gosh, it's had every function in *On Agate Hill*, every function. So many of the songs just expressed the time, like the minstrel song 'Old Dan Tucker'. I mean the music was a vehicle for history, for expressing history, and for capturing the mood of time and place. And it was such a dire time, so charged with emotion, that it's almost too much for any sort of reasoned writing. I think music captured it better than anything else. The ballad is a way to tell Molly's own story. For me, what happens in that book, what happens to Molly Petree, is she goes from being a girl who has no role in her own life —is just a little observer of the life around her, has no power and is an endangered child in many ways— to becoming a really fully realized person and having her own song, singing her own song. The whole ballad is an expression of her, of her life, and what she has gone through. She not only finds her voice, she lives her own life in a way that surprised even me, I have to say! [*Laughs*]

CRR: *Was Alice Gerrard's record* The Road to Agate Hill *(2007) the result of a creative exchange between a singer and a fiction writer? Or to put it differently, did she inspire you and then you inspired her to create her record of traditional Appalachian songs?*

LS: Yes, absolutely! Well, actually we started performing together! When this novel was going to come out, somehow I couldn't conceive of it, of doing any readings from it, without her. So I asked her if she would come and play the music. And she said yeah and she got two other women to come as a band, and sometimes we even had more. It was just great. So every reading I did was really a lot of fun. It would be me reading and her performing, and we had so much fun. We did it to small groups and we did it to enormous groups. At Appalachian State University, we did it for a thousand people. It just depended. We just had the best time. And then she decided to make a CD out of the music.

CRR: *For this novel, you wrote the ballad of 'Molly and the Traveling Man', but this is not the first time you write songs of your own in your fiction. You also did that in* The Devil's Dream. *Most of the music you mention in* The Devil's Dream *is music that is there, music somebody else created, but...*

LS: It's public domain. That's older songs. But then there are songs that I wrote, like Little Luther Wade's song [in *Oral History*], and the ballad at the beginning, and 'I'm a Single Girl, Laying Here Alone Again'. I've always written songs. I can't sing a lick. I think this is all out of some sort of envy, wish fulfillment. [*Laughs*]

CRR: *A ballad is a narrative song, a song that tells a story, which is in fact what country music is all about. This novel has many of the elements and themes you usually find in ballads. Tell me about it.*

LS: Oh, absolutely, and that's the popularity of it, I think. It's because people want a story. They really do. They want a story. And this novel, *On Agate Hill*, has many themes

you would usually find in ballads. It has the tragic love story, the murder, the dramatic deaths, the long separations, fights, wars. You know, it's got all that stuff.

CRR: *And betrayal?*

LS: Betrayal, yeah.

CRR: *Death is one of the main components of American ballads, and your novel includes a murder ballad. What is it about ballads that you find so fascinating?*

LS: I always feel like they are telling a true story somehow because all stories are finally sad. All true stories end in death, and they will deal with that, and they go right to the heart. They are about love, death, betrayal, belief, hope. They are just about the major things of our lives, and I think so often other forms of art tend to trip that stuff up too much and sugarcoat it. The ballad to me captures the beauty of the sound and the beauty of the expression, and it provides some sort of comfort through repetition. Somehow you can accept what is inevitable if it comes to you in the form of a ballad. So I guess that's why it seems to me this book should be a ballad. I think of it as a ballad the way I think of *The Devil's Dream* as an album! [*Laughs*]

CRR: *What happens in real life does not always coincide with the story a ballad tells, and you show that in your novel. 'Molly and the Traveling Man' tells only a part of the story. Were you making a point about ballad history and ballad making here?*

LS: Yes, I was. I was, yeah, because I believe that there can be parallel stories, and each one can present a vision of the truth that gets it pretty much as well as the others. There can be sort of parallel stories. But I was saying something about how stories are constructed, how they are created and why. It's always the storyteller's story or the balladeer's song. Because once the artistry gets in there, there's always a twist. It's always twisted by whoever is singing it or presenting it or whatever. So it's hard to tell quite what the story is.

CRR: *I found some interesting parallelisms between 'The Ballad of Frankie and Albert' and the one you created for the novel: a woman shooting her man, a musician who is a womanizer, and the trial that followed the murder. Despite the obvious differences between these two stories, did you find inspiration for your story in some existing ballad or story?*

LS: Well, I think that I had just internalized that, you know. But I'm sure I found inspiration on some level that was unconscious, for sure. Oh, let me say just one more thing. For many years, I have been thinking about some of these ideas and even going back to when I was first beginning to do so many oral history interviews and also taking down songs. I was catching songs. I was a songcatcher —that's what they used to call somebody who would go around the mountains. But as a really young woman doing all this just for my own pleasure, I was always so struck by the different versions I would get of the same thing. I just remember one in particular. I have never actually written about this particular thing, but I was interviewing at one point a whole bunch of really old people in Grundy,

where I am from, about the last public hanging that had been in the square there. It was a famous one. John Harden found his wife in bed with another man and killed them both. It was the hanging of John Harden and it was in the public square. Over a thousand people came. They brought sandwiches and they were selling stuff on the square. Anyway, I was interviewing a whole lot of people who had either been there when they were very little or heard it first-hand from parents who had. And I got a million different stories like was he tall, was he short, did he sing a song that he wrote, did he actually give a chaw of tobacco to my great-grandmother who was the jailer, all this different stuff. It has just always been completely astonishing to me to find all the different versions, and you get that when you get along to something like *On Agate Hill* and a ballad is done. I had this again in *Oral History* about making up —how somebody says they've seen a ghost and everybody's saying it starts to tell the story. It's the crazy girl who has been spurned by somebody and she says "I seen her and I seen this and that". So she's making up a story and telling it. So I guess I have always been interested in that, the sort of appropriation of the truth by the storyteller or the singer.

CRR: On Agate Hill *also includes several musicians like Spence, Jacky Jarvis, and towards the end even Juney*.

LS: Yeah, well, real life does inform the writing of any book, and my son had died during the writing of it. He was a musician too, so it just seemed totally natural that Juney would be a musician. It was a source of enormous strength to me and a kind of healing thing, too, when Juney appeared.

CRR: *In Jacky Jarvis, Molly finds her own 'Jack of Diamonds', so to speak. He is a character associated with orality, like Honey Breeding in* Fair and Tender Ladies *in many ways*...

LS: Oh, that's right! I did not even think about that, but that's true. [*Laughter*] Oh, he is and I was not aware of that, but I can see that when you say it. I hadn't really thought about that. Well, they are both very close to the land, to the animal. Honey is like the honey bee or whatever, and Jacky doesn't live by the rules of civilization, either.

CRR: *At different points in the novel, you also make specific references to the exchange that took place between black and white musicians, particularly with the banjo, thus alluding to the significant contribution of black music to Appalachian music and American music in general. Tell me about it*.

LS: Yeah, and I guess one reason I have been aware of all my life is that I have been fortunate enough to know a number of musicians very, very well. Along about the first time when I met Alice Gerrard, which is 30 years ago or something, I met Tommy Thompson and Cecee Conway. Cecee was doing all that research on the banjo then, and of course Tommy Thompson —her husband, who is dead now— was playing a lot, adapting a lot of his banjo tunes from the black. So all that interested me and found its way in the novel.

CRR: *Apart from 'Old Dan Tucker', a banjo song from the minstrel tradition, you have also included old hymns, such as 'Climbing Jacob's Ladder', which Liddy sings, pointing to the emergence of spiritual songs and subsequent creation of African American hymnbooks soon after the Civil War*.

LS: Well, so many of those spirituals had a hidden meaning. The Negro spirituals had a hidden meaning because they were about the end of slavery, like 'Climbing Jacob's Ladder' was about escaping from slavery. I didn't know this when I wrote it, but one of the most pervasive slave narratives was the one about flight. This is so weird to me. I just feel with this book I was kind of tracked in psychologically to a lot of things I wasn't aware of. When the older couple, the slave couple, run away and Molly is watching it from the snowy balcony, I had no idea that they would fly, that they would just start flying. That was not anything I had thought about before. I was just writing it and all of a sudden they just fly. I was kind of astonished by that. Then I went to Nashville, where there's an old plantation house, and I had taken my children to lunch. There they had in their tours an interpretation; they had not only the plantation life but the slave life. In their gift shop, they had stuff for sale, including the slave books about slave narratives and so on. I was looking at that and it turns out that the most pervasive image of all is flight! You have all these different songs and slave drawings, where people are literally taking flight out of the field, whole groups of them, and this flying is a whole big thing, the flying Negro! Then I talked to Cindy [Lucinda MacKethan] about it, and she said "Oh, yeah, that's one of the most pervasive images, and a lot of times it is told with a gospel framework but it is leaving, escaping from slavery". I had no idea where this came from.

CRR: *Well, it works as a beautiful image*.

LS: Well, it does. But I mean, again, it's just one of these images because it certainly wasn't me consciously seeking out. It was wild.

CRR: *One thing I find very fascinating is this recurrent notion of your fiction coming out of the pages of a book and coming to life in stage adaptations, with your stories being heard and the music played. There is almost a natural match between your fiction and the stage, don't you think?*

LS: Yeah, I do. I always loved the stage, always loved it. I always acted as a child. I was always writing plays and making everybody put on the plays for me. So it is very vivid. I mean, I tend to write in scenes. These are not abstract —I am not an abstract writer. People are acting out things on the pages, so it's a natural transition. But I think it has also to do with serendipity. I mean, I think early on, well with *The Devil's Dream*, Paul Ferguson began to teach this course on oral interpretation of Southern literature at UNC, and he began to get his students to adapt from contemporary Southern authors. One of them did a really good job with part of *The Devil's Dream*, and then Paul got the idea of writing the play of *The Devil's Dream*. After that, he's done several others and it's sort of just sprung from there.

CRR: *And now you even write musicals like* Good Ol' Girls *that make it to Broadway! Again literature and music go hand in hand. What made you enter this new terrain along with fellow writer and friend Jill McCorkle?*

LS: Well, it's really not new terrain because I have loved music so much. When I do readings, I would get different musicians to come do stuff with me. And when *The Devil's Dream* came out, Clyde Edgerton and his then wife, Susan, began performing with me. He was great. I lived in Nashville, so I have real good friends who are musicians and songwriters, particularly Marshall Chapman. And Marshall does this thing every autumn during the southern festival of books at the Bluebird Cafe. Well, it's this 'Songwriter's Night' and 'In The Round' thing, where she started, and they've done it for fifty years. She asked me if I would do 'Songwriters' and 'The Round' with her, and I did. She would sing a song and I would just read something. I said, well, let's get Clyde, so we did it one time. The first time we ever did it, there were four of us —it was me, Clyde reading, her and Guy Clark singing. And, of course, there're tough songs and stories, too. So they started doing this and I got Jill to do it. Then we all just got used to the idea, and when I got a new book out —I can't even remember what it was— I got Marshall and Matraca to get up on stage with me and sing with me. So it kind of evolved. But Matraca is the one that had the idea of making a specific show because she wrote the song 'Good Ol' Girls', and she called up Marshall. Then they called me and, of course, I said yes immediately and got Jill in on it. Then we had all this stuff, and it really just needed help with form and so on, so we got Paul Ferguson in on it. But we had the concept and the monologues, the stories and so on. So it was very organic. This whole thing has been very organic.

CRR: *Now you are writing a novel based on Zelda Fitzgerald, who died in a fire at Highland Hospital in Ashville, NC. Any country music in it?*

LS: You know what? Maybe not. I am not sure. Well, there's music in here because there's a lot of theatricals at the hospital. But it's a different kind of music. It's more like the jazz age and that kind of thing.

CRR: *Thank you so much, Lee.*

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Carmen Rueda-Ramos is an Associate Professor of English at Universitat Rovira i Virgili (Tarragona, Spain). Her research interests cover the literature of the American South, particularly Appalachian fiction. She is the author of *Voicing the Self: Female Identity and Language in Lee Smith's Fiction* (2009) and a Member of the International Board of Advisors of the Journal of Appalachian Studies.

Address: Departament d'Estudis Anglesos y Alemanys. Universitat Rovira i Virgili. Campus Catalunya, Facultad de Letras. Avenida Catalunya, 35. 43002, Tarragona, Spain. Tel.: +34 977 559 609. Fax: +34 977 299 488.