



Fair and Tender Ladies

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From Ivy Rowe's birth on Blue Star Mountain, her life is full of passion and longing as she writes letters to family and friends. Ivy's talent as a budding writer is recognized early on, but just as she is about to realize her dream of going north to school, she is betrayed by her passionate nature. Facing an unwed pregnancy and publicly admonished for her sins, Ivy marries a childhood friend who takes her back to the family homestead, where she bears several children and endures the endless toil of a farmer's wife. Through her trials Ivy holds firm, knowing that her life will hold happiness one day.

Fair and Tender Ladies Details

Date : Published June 17th 1993 by Ballantine Books (first published 1988)

ISBN : 9780345383990

Author : Lee Smith

Format : Paperback 316 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, American, Southern

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From Reader Review Fair and Tender Ladies for online ebook

Elyse Walters says

“From where we stood, we could see for miles. I thought I could see Sugar Fork but I couldn’t be sure, there were lots and lots of hollers, and I saw them all, valley after valley, ridge after ridge, Bethel Mountain beyond — but now for the first time I could see over the top of Bethel Mountain to another mountain, blue, purple, then mountain after mountain, rolling like the sea. It was so beautiful. A single twisted pine grew bravely up out of the rocks before us. Mile after mile of empty air stretched out behind it, the sky so blue, the sun so bright. And the wind, which kept on blowing all the time — now I recalled the famous endless wind on top of Blue Star Mountain”.

Ivy Rowe.....

A devoted pen pal, a ‘forever’ devoted pen pal, a “I will remane forever I hope your devoted Pen friend”, a “I do not know wether you will recive this letter or not

thogh I remane forever your devoted”, your devoted granddaughter,

“I will not send this letter as I remane your hateful”, sharing ...”we are fine thogh and I remane your devoted”, forever always, your devoted Ivy Rowe, “I remane your exited and grateful”, forever best friend, devoted sister,.....

“Oh Daddy I miss you so much do not think I am crazy because I feel they is something terrible starting to happen and you know it is dog days so whatever it is will go on happening, but I remane your loving devoted daughter”, yor devoted friend, “But I miss Momma. But I remain your devoted although ruint sister”,

“I remane yor truthful”, forever your devoted best friend, “I remane your grateful”,

“I remane your loving sister”,a loving sister, a long last sister, a happy sister, a crazy sister, a loyal sister, your sister, a thankful student, wife, your loving mama, an aging thin sister, “now I remain your loving and old mamaw”.

Sometimes when Ivy was growing up — [compassionate by nature] — even with so many people on the mountain —Ivy still felt lonesome. She didn’t feel as though she had anybody she could really talk with. But - she knew when her baby Joli came — she would talk with her.

Ivy wrote letters

I LOVED THEM ALL.....(she also always loved a story)

There was one letter where I wanted to stand up and cheer, “HALLELUJAH, AMEN, YOU GO GIRL”:

“Dear Miss Mabel Maynard,

I know you will be interested to hear from me because you acted so mean to me always and then you felt at my stomach the day I left, and ran off crying. You cannot deny you did this, because you did. And since I got up here, I have had some time to think about it, and reflect. So I have something to say to you.

Miss Maynard, do not pity me. Do not bother to dislike me, nor pity me, nor anything else, because I do not need anything from you, nor want to either.

My Little baby Joli was born September 10, 1918. She is all mine, I have never had a thing of my own before. She is the most beautiful baby in the world.

So, I pity you!”

Your former acquaintance, Ivy Rowe

Ivy Rowe.....

I loved her spirit!

She had a zest for love - for inner understanding- accepting the way that things turn out - not always as we dreamed - seeing reality and people - and herself - the way they/ she really were/was.

Ivy was mindful - aware - made mistakes and took responsibility for them - Sometime she was tired of being grateful- could you blame anyone? But mostly Ivy 'was' a grateful human being. She lived her life without regret.....knew when to apologize.....lived through good and bad days. She danced - she mourned - made us laugh and cry. And she taught us that by following our own path —life can be a truly fulfilling existence.

This was my first Lee Smith book — THANK YOU Sara.....and Diane too.....

BOTH of your reviews express how I feel about this book deep down myself.

I can't ever remember reading a portrait of life — spanning 70 years of an Appalachian woman. Orof any woman that was so wholeheartedly beautiful.

I'm touched as can be by this unforgettable story.....(and boy the stories just keep coming and coming).....with 8 siblings alone....life is not dull.

I loved it all

INCREDIBLE writing! I paid attention to the way the dialect changed over the years.

Wow....I tried to imagine the patience and skill it had to take to write an entire novel like this. It was actually very easy to read but I can't imagine it was easy to write.

Artistic writing talent!!! Really gorgeous - and sooooo charming!!

Poppycock.....My favorite FUN WORD Ivy used it several times!

nonsense - hogwash- baloney!

Brilliantly written.....heartwarming to our souls!!!

Cathrine ?? says

4.5 ★

Take me home country roads . I had a friend, recently deceased, who was raised in the Ozark mountains and I could hear her accent and unique phrases like "down to a gnat's eyelash" as told through Ivy Rowe's letters recounting her life on Blue Star Mountain as she describes passing through a field of "lightning bugs like walking among the stars in the sky." I was unfamiliar with the author until I heard her comments about Harper Lee and To Kill A Mockingbird as part of a recent documentary on PBS. Coincidentally my GR friend Connie had recently posted her review on this book. Years ago I saw a movie called Songcatcher about a woman named Lily who "ventures into the most isolated areas of the mountains to collect songs and finds herself increasingly enchanted—not only by the rugged purity of the music, but also by the raw courage and endurance of the local people as they carve out meaningful lives against the harshest conditions" (quote from film review). More recently I have enjoyed reading about American Appalachia, past and present, through the writing of author Ron Rash. Fortunately, all this has supplanted the only other image of the area and its people I had originally been exposed to in the movie Deliverance. Probably not for everyone and no doubt my personal tastes played a big part in my enjoyment of this novel, but like Lily I was completely enchanted. Highly recommend if you want to travel back to another time and place that has disappeared along with the great American Chestnut tree.

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Singing that tells a story from Songcatcher: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNN6q...>

Suzy says

I had not heard of this author nor of this book before I saw it was a pick this month of the GR group *On the Southern Literary Trail*. It's a favorite group that has introduced me to many great authors and stories, so I dived right in. Boy, am I glad I did! This book will certainly have a place in my top ten books ever. Yes, it was that good.

Ivy Rowe is a woman born into a dirt-poor family on a farm beside Sugar Fork creek on a mountain in southwest Virginia coal country, an often-cruel circumstance. But Ivy has a zest for life, an unceasing curiosity, a drive for education, an outsized love of nature and a passion for writing. We meet her in 1915 when she is twelve and we get to know about her life through the letters she writes over the years to a handful of family and friends. And what a life! She wants to be a writer and gets oh-so-close to going north to be educated in Boston, but life has other plans for Ivy. Life is not always easy and her drive to live it fully doesn't always lead her in the best direction, but Ivy is a model for making the best of her choices and what life throws at her.

I loved watching the sweep history unfold through Ivy's letters from 1915 through the early 1970's. When she tells, for example, a friend about rural electrification coming to the valley below her, we too are amazed at the moment the lights go on, looking like a valley full of fireflies. We feel her heart break at the loss of lives from war, we know the thrill of her first store-bought dress, we marvel along with her getting a radio and listening to baseball, and we too chuckle at women wearing pantsuits.

Ivy doesn't just live life, she sees life and from this seeing comes a deep knowing. As we experience life through Ivy's eyes, we are able to see and to know as well. When I finished Fair and Tender Ladies, I was "ruint" for reading anything else for a few days, to borrow one of Ivy's oft-use words.

A note on the audiobook

This was one of the best I've ever listened to. I felt as if I were sitting on the front porch up there on the mountain with Ivy as she told me the story of her life. While I was reading this book, I found myself thinking and talking with a southern accent! After all, if I were sitting up there with her, I must speak that way too. We likely had a pitcher of lemonade, a fan to keep us cool from the heat and perhaps bluegrass music playing on the radio.

Mmars says

Really 4.5 stars.

A couple years ago I fell in love with Lee Smith's Appalachian storytelling in Oral History. I have finally returned to her with "Fair and Tender Ladies". The book is penned by Ivy Rowe in letters to various friends and relatives, beginning with her preteen years during the WWI era. She loves to read but has not yet developed her spelling skills, so the first 70 pages or so took a bit longer to read as I ciphered out her words and many colloquialisms. But from the get go Ivy is one spirited and attractive red-head. She also has a huge heart and an overactive memory. Her family lives isolated on Sugar Mountain and her father is ill and passes

away, leaving her mother struggling to manage their farm, and often relying on the kindness of relatives and neighbors to put food on the table.

Eventually her mother moves in with a friend in town and Ivy gets a “room” of her own. After her mother passes away when Ivy is 18, she goes to live with one of her older sisters in a mining town. I appreciated that Smith chose to add this mining community in her book. The societal strata and living conditions here post-WWI was informative and interesting.

After a mining disaster, Ivy marries and returns to Sugar Mountain for the rest of her life. I really don’t want to say more about the story, because there would spoilers and I’ve probably spoiled enough already.

I’m not a big fan of epistolary novels, but I loved this one. I think it’s easy to get bogged down by the mundane or the letters get repetitious, or are terse, or only skim the surface and are unable to give the reader the whole picture. None of that applies here. Ivy writes to many people and shares what she believes would be of interest to them. She gives advice. She tells great stories (Smith’s forte). And, she bares her soul and tells all to Silvaney, her disturbed sister placed in an asylum in the early part of the book. Interestingly, there are no love letters, though she was “ruint” at a young age and had flings, but she has a good marriage with a warm, caring husband.

I’ve taken a half-star away feeling that the late-life letters were spaced farther apart. I would have liked more depth to her aging process. Perhaps this is realistic, though. As people age, it is not at all unusual to become more insular and have fewer close relationships.

Highly recommended slice of life in Virginia’s Appalachian mountains covering a large swath of the 20th century

Julie Durnell says

A totally 5-star book! This is an exceptional epic story of Appalachia in the 20th century written entirely as letters to people in Ivy's life. I was so unexpectedly taken with this life story. The vernacular put me off just a bit at first but then I settled in to sit a spell with Ivy and her family and neighbors. It is just an incredible slice of the Virginia Appalachia life back then. It tells it like it was but does not wallow in the poverty or anything that offshoots from that. Ivy loved learning and reading and while she doesn't break from her roots she does somewhat rise above it. She made mistakes but learned from those and doesn't look back with too much regret. As she becomes an older woman one becomes aware just how strong she is, facing hardship and raising a family on the mountain.

In her words: "I will not be lonely. Even if it is just me sitting on this porch, I will not be lonely. But I will tell you another fact which is just as true, it hit me yesterday. I can read every book that John O'Hara ever wrote. I can make up my own life now whichever way I want to, it is like I am a girl again, for I am not beholden to a soul. I can act like a crazy old woman if I want to which I do. I can get up in the morning and eat a hotdog, which I did yesterday. I don't know what I might do tomorrow!"

There are very, very few books that I could finish and then start right back in re-reading but this I sure could. Highly recommended!

Sara says

This is a fabulous book with an unforgettable heroine named Ivy Rowe. It is great--**believe you me!** Set out in letters that begin with a twelve year old Ivy and take us through an entire lifetime, Ivy's soul is put onto paper, sprinkled with all her hopes, dreams and disappointments. I defy anyone to get past the first letter without loving Ivy unreservedly. She surely made me laugh, cry, rejoice and lament, and she made me remember something of a life that I once had a glimpse of that is now gone forever. If you traveled deep into Appalachia, you might find people still living somewhat the same, but I doubt it. There just isn't anywhere like Blue Star Mountain anymore.

I have sometimes thought that my own life has a soundtrack. I can conjure up specific events and people when I hear certain songs. Apparently, Ivy Rowe's life had a soundtrack as well. I loved all the references to old songs and, after one of my fine GR friends, Tom, posted one of the songs off of Youtube, I felt compelled to seek out every song that was mentioned and listen to them one by one. It was a surreal experience, since they were songs that conjured my own father and his brothers, who loved nothing better than to get together on the porch with fiddle and guitars and fill the night with folk music, hymns and popular songs of their time.

Ivy dreams of a bigger life, one filled with purpose and travel and adventure, but she finds hers is destined to be a rather simple life, lived primarily at Sugar Fork and circling around a small community and a limited number of people. But, I think she finds, in the end, that simple lives have purpose too, and perhaps as many or more facets than those lived in exotic places or in fancy homes. Like the creek that leads to Sugar Fork, her life meanders and turns and changes, and it is the memory of all that moving water that matters the most.

"I felt a pain shoot through me, like an arrow in my heart. Oh Joli, you get so various as you get old! I have been so many people. And yet I think the most important thing is Don't Forget. Don't ever forget."

Lee Smith is an adroit writer, who almost paints her scenes, like airbrushing with words. I had a true sense of the beauty and wildness of Sugar Fork, the rising mountains, the foliage, and the fields of wildflowers.

"But night comes in slow over Bethel Mountain and we watch it come, like it is sneaking in I reckon, stealing across the mountains ridge by ridge, they go blue and purple before your very eyes, and then the mist will rise."

I could not be happier to have climbed this mountain with Ivy. She is so refreshingly open-minded, so kind, feeling, accepting and imperfect. Like so many of us, she doesn't always appreciate what she has, she acts rashly, she caves into desires she barely understands, she falls for lines that she knows are not true, but she presses forward, forgives others and often forgives herself. But, through it all, she chooses. She never abdicates the choice to others and the responsibility, credit and the blame, are always hers alone. If, at the end of my life, I could look back and see a life as full of love and meaning as Ivy's, I think I could be satisfied.

I am always indebted to Diane and The Southern Literary Trail for introducing me to the best authors and the finest books. I have discovered Tom Franklin, Howard Bahr, Tim Gautreaux, Michael Farris Smith, and now Lee Smith. How on earth do you say "thank you" for that?

JG (The Introverted Reader) says

I'm an Appalachian mountain girl. I felt like I knew Ivy from the first sentence. She truly seemed to come to life on the pages. I came along a few generations after her time, but I felt like she could be one of my grandmothers. She talked the way I probably still talk :-) Education was important to her, and she was very smart, but she never really got a chance. I guess, really, I felt like I could have been reading family history. That says a lot about a novel.

Re-read June 28, 2009

There's not all that much to add. This is a book that touches my heart and it's hard for me to write about those.

Ivy Rowe *is* this book. She's spunky, she makes mistakes, she loves, she lives, she's stubborn, she's wrong sometimes; in short, she just feels real to me in a way that very few characters do. Oh, I write fairly often about how I love this or that character, but Ivy feels like someone I know. The novel is written in a series of letters that Ivy writes to others. You get inside her head and stay there. You follow Ivy from the time she's about 10 years old on. There's a whole progression of wide-eyed optimism to teenage carelessness and invincibility to repentance to more carelessness to acceptance and reflection. I live a whole other lifetime when I read this book.

Lee Smith chose to have Ivy write in our southern Appalachian dialect and she gets it just absolutely perfect. I literally "hear" Ivy with my grandmother's voice, and I hear the the preacher Sam Russell Sage as my uncle. Ivy's sister Silvaney doesn't really speak, but she reminds me of my grandmother's sister, Sue. Do you see the connection I make to this book?

It might be a little hard to read at first because Ivy's letters are full of childish mistakes and she spells our dialect phonetically, but don't be put off by that. It gets better and I think you'll understand it anyway. But for a story about a woman who makes her share of mistakes, but lives a life worth living, pick this one up. I think you'll enjoy it. And if you happen to be from the southern Appalachians, I think you'll feel the same strong connection I do. This book has a permanent place in my heart and soul.

Connie says

Lee Smith's beautiful prose in this story told through the letters of Ivy Rowe made my heart and mind sing with nostalgia. This story follows the stubborn and very wise Ivy from a young girl at the end of the 18th century to a very old woman in the mid 1900's. Though poor and poorly educated she had a thirst for knowledge and a zest for life. She never lost that ability of the young to look around and see the beauty of your surroundings as well as be grateful for the simplest things in life. Ivy was not simple, far from it but she always kept that sense of awe and wonder.

This story is about hardship, about great love, about great loss as well as about great yearning and disappointment. Family mattered, no matter what. Ivy travelled through her life with a dignity and quite a sense of humor that was matched only by how strongly she felt things. She had little fear and charged ahead without considering consequences, then accepted whatever came her way.

Having come from a family of strong midwestern pioneers, and having lived in the mountains of rural Tennessee and North Carolina that mimic the setting of this story I appreciated how on target Smith was in her descriptions of the people, the traditions, the lore of this generation. Her descriptions of the settings were lyrical, almost musical and I could close my eyes and see the fields of wildflowers, smell the rain in the air before the storm, hear the birds in the early morning and feel the dew on my bare feet.

Having also received a weekly letter from home for the last 35 years of my life (since I left home) I could appreciate Ivy's letters as her way to stay connected to those who held a place in her heart. These letters were full of great sorrows and joys and everything in between. I also appreciated the changes in society that were discussed in these letters, how progress in the world eventually comes to all corners. We learned about not only Ivy's life but that of her family as well through these letters. She was the person who kept them all connected.

With Fair and Tender Ladies Smith has cemented herself in my mind as the ultimate writer of Southern story telling. I listened to the audio and so appreciated the language of the mountains. The dialogue held the charm of the rural, mountain folk yet the speech was almost like the old English, no contractions but correct grammar. The spot on narrative took this to a 5 star rating. It has been a while since I have laughed, and cried and embraced a character as I did with Ivey. I will miss her.

Lyn Cosby says

I think that maybe I love Ivy Rowe more than any character I've read. The reader meets Ivy as a child and grows old with her. She's a natural-born writer, so the story is told in epistolary style through the letters Ivy is forever writing to her friends and family. Ivy believes she yearns to see the world, but as her life progresses and she has opportunities to escape the poverty of her Appalachian upbringing, she discovers that the pull of home and family are stronger than that of travel and adventure. Her life is hard; the story could be depressing. Instead, it is inspiring. Ivy is as wonderful a heroine as any you'll find. She's spunky, tragic, comic, observant, and I think "joie de vivre" is a great description of this character. This is Lee Smith's finest effort. The colloquialisms scattered throughout the book are charming and true-to-life. If you ever get an opportunity to see the play and hear the bluegrass songs inspired by the book, I advise you to grab it.

Lawyer says

Fair and Tender Ladies: A Life Well Lived

My sincere thanks to Diane Barnes, my reading friend and a Co-Moderator of On the Southern Literary Trail, who selected Fair and Tender Ladies by Lee Smith, as her Moderator's Choice for March, 2018.

3 To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

2 A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

3 A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

4 A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

5 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

6 A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

7 A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

8 A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8, King James Version

Those few verses render the entire range of our lives on this earth. It is simple and it is wise. For it is the story of each of us. These are among my favorite verses of the Bible. Never have I seen it written so beautifully, so perfectly, as in this novel by Lee Smith.

Ivy Rowe is a woman whose life will remain indelibly a part of my life as a reader. While each of us lives out the words of Ecclesiastes, each of us must do so in our own way. This is Ivy Rowe's story. Told completely in the letters Ivy wrote through the course of her life, from a budding adolescent to a very old woman.

This book is one to cherish, to keep, to love, to return to, no matter how many books we have left unread in the time allotted to us. It is simply that special. Ivy has much to tell us and she does in a manner each of us can see a bit of ourselves, whether man or woman. We laugh with her. We cry with her.

As simple as the words of Ecclesiastes are, contained in them is the question just when is it time to do those things in our lives. Often the time to get may be easy. To keep may be as easy. But accepting loss and deciding to cast away what we have held dear is not so easily done.

The life of Ivy Rowe teaches the answers to the hard questions. Ivy's story is that of a life well lived. It now joins the relatively few books on my favorites shelf. May it be on yours as well.

Diane Barnes says

I just re-acquainted myself with Ivy Rowe, after an absence of 30 years, and she is still the same wonderful woman I knew then. I have been in her heart and in her head for the last few days, and am now emerging with an inspired sense of just how wonderful life can be when you face it with awe and courage.

Ivy was not a paragon of virtue by society's standards. She followed her heart and her passions, never doing the sensible thing, though she was as smart as they came. She loved indiscriminately, but not always wisely, and refused to apologize for her decisions. She was religious in her own way, but never "got saved" or was much of a church-goer, as she disagreed with a lot of God's plans and actions. She trusted herself to do what was right for her, a thing that can be hard to do in a small mountain community. But as she said, "once you are reint, it gives you a lot of freedom".

Born in 1900, we follow Ivy's life through the letters she wrote to friends and family. From a childhood with 8 brothers and siblings, on a farm way up high on Sugar Fork, through youth and marriage and motherhood and old age, we hear her opinions on everything she cares most about.

Oh, let me age as Ivy did, always learning, ready to accept new ways, but recognizing the value of the old ways too. "I said to Maudy, Those birth control pills are great. They are the greatest thing since drip dry. You ought to get yourself some".

Her father used to say, "Farming is pretty work". So is writing, when you do it like Lee Smith does, creating a world and populating it with a heroine like Ivy Rowe. My second reading of this book cements her place in literary characters never to be forgotten.

Candi says

"It's funny how a person can be so busy living that they forget this is it. This is my life."

In the words of Ivy Rowe, one of the most spirited, wisest, and most memorable literary characters EVER, I am 'ruint' after reading this incredible novel! Seriously, I cannot get this book out of my head and out of my heart. It seems everything else will pale in comparison for quite some time. I had never heard of this book or the very talented author, Lee Smith, until now. I have surely been remiss, but it is never too late to make up for lost time. I'm sure Ivy would agree.

Make no mistake about this book – it's not light and fluffy, not sappy, and not just another mundane book about the toils of a backwoods woman and her brood of children. What is this about then? Well, it's so many things... it's about the hopes and dreams of a young girl, love for family, courage, standing up for what you believe in, facing the consequences of your choices, middle age, great sorrow and abundant joy, love for the land, the passion for reading and writing, and about growing old with dignity. I'm sure as readers we've seen all of these topics tackled before. But never have I seen all of these things wrapped up in one package and expressed through a voice with such honesty, passion, and immediacy, with no excuses made nor any appeals for our sympathy or pity. *"I have made my bed and I wish everybody would let me lie in it."*

We follow the life of Ivy Rowe from adolescence to old age through a series of letters written to various persons – a childhood pen pal, siblings, parents, friends, teachers, and children. The letters are so intimate, however, that they are often more like a diary entry, sharing with us the deepest and truest thoughts of a very candid correspondent. Ivy Rowe was born up on Blue Star Mountain in Appalachia. Much of her writing is in the regional dialect, but this did not for one minute throw me off or confuse me. In fact, it added to the authenticity, as if I were reading real letters recovered from a young woman's hope chest. As Ivy ages, likewise her writing matures. She dreams of becoming an author someday, and her letters are a testament to the fact that even if she never publishes a novel, she truly is a gifted writer. She shares with us her joy for life, memories of old stories, and her desire to travel and become educated. *"I thought of sliding on the frozen river in the snow, and of the lady sisters skimming home across the snow after they had told their stories, I thought of the story of Whitebear Whittington, and then I thought of all the stories I dont know yet, of books and books full of stories in Boston. I imagined their lether bindings and their deep rich covers and the pretty swirling paper inside the covers, like the snow."*

Ivy makes such astute observations on life; she makes mistakes – sometimes very big ones, and she forgives herself. I have often thought and said that forgiveness is a gift. Well, I do believe that is true. Ivy has taught

me, however, that even more than forgiving another human being, forgiveness of one's self is perhaps the most difficult yet the most generous of all. As Ivy enters middle age, a stage in life with which I can currently identify, her story becomes even more gripping and meaningful - perhaps because I can relate to those questions she asks herself about her own life and whether she has spent it in the way she had hoped. *"I guess that the seeds of what we will do are in us all along, only sometimes they don't get no water, they don't grow. Other times, well – you see what can happen."* Oh Ivy, you made me laugh, you made me cry, and you made me think... and think some more. I want to live my life as you did – with spunk, with acceptance, with strong affections and last but not least, with peace.

I probably don't need to say it, but this is a clear favorite and I would tell anyone to please read this book! I have to return this little jewel to the library soon, but my very own copy should arrive any day now - along with one more Lee Smith novel I have ordered, likely to be followed by a succession of her work.

"This is important, I want to remember this, it is all so important, this is happening to me. And I am so glad to write it down lest I forget."

Cheri says

*"Baby when I get down I turn to you
And you make sense of what I do
I know it isn't hard to say
But baby just when this world seems mean and cold
Our love comes shining red and gold
And all the rest is by the way*

*"Why worry, there should be laughter after pain
There should be sunshine after rain
These things have always been the same
So why worry now"*

-- *Why Worry*, Emmylou Harris, Mark Knopfler, Songwriters: Mark Knopfler

"Oh Ivy, sing ivory, rosebud and thorn..."

An epistolary novel, this story is told through letters from young Ivy, beginning around her 12th year, to pen pals, family and friends. Through these, we learn not only her story, but also the story of this hardscrabble way of life in the turn of the century for those living in Virginia's Appalachian region. Along with the struggles of this life, young Ivy struggles with spelling, as her early letters show, but that takes away none of the charm, especially as lovely as her letters can be.

The first of her *"Letters from Sugar Fork"* she writes to another young girl of the story of how her parents first came to live on Blue Star Mountain, and her mother's thoughts when she first saw the land of their future home.

*"She saw Sugar Fork sparkle in the sun like a ladys dimond necklace.
She saw Pilgrim Knob rise up direckly behind the house, and Blue Star Mountain beyond. They call it that*

because of how blue it looks from down below, along Home Creek and Daves Branch, why you can see Blue Star Mountain clear from Majestic on a pretty day...now you can see all them neghbor peoples houses fine but you cant see ounr, nor get to it nether, without wanting to. You are not going to happen upon us, is what I mean. And Blue Star Mountain don't seem so blue nether, when you up here. But it is the prettest place in the world."

As Ivy grows older, her spelling shows improvement, but retains the colloquial speech of this region, which I loved.

Ivy loves her family, especially her sister Silvaney, who is "*so pretty, she is the sweetest, all silverhaired like she was fotched up on the moon.*" Silvaney is five years older than Ivy, but due to the "brain fever" Silvaney had as a child, life is more challenging for her, and so they play together. In their childhood they play house together, building ovens out of rocks, and "cookies" out of sticks, drawing water from Sugar Fork, and added fancy hair dressings out of Black-Eyed Susans and Queen Anne's Lace. And while their life is not an easy one, life is good.

But life has a way of changing courses, as most of us know, and as years pass, changes do come, some - perhaps most - unwelcome, but some are just nature's way. Ivy matures physically, and her dreams change as the years pass, but there is a recognition of her truth, at her core. The words of Shakespeare's Polonius, "*This above all: to thine own self be true*" seem to be her life's song, even when she finds herself "ruint," and the object of gossip, she owns her decisions and refuses to feel shame in them. She forgives herself, and others, their trespasses.

Reflecting on the swift passing of time, the loss of those idyllic, lazy days of childhood, and those spent playing with Sylvaney, she writes:

"I think this is one reason I write so many letters to you, Silvaney, to hold onto what is passing. Because the days seem to go faster and faster, especially now that I have got Joli, the days whirl along like the leaves blowing down off the mountain right now. I remember Geneva saying that the older you get, the faster time goes by. Well, I want to stop it! I want to hold up its flight like you would hold up a train, and steal what I can from each day."

So many reflections on love, what constitutes a life well-lived, the busy-ness of life meddling with the things that matter most.

"It's funny how a person can be so busy living that they forget this is it. This is my life."

Oh, Ivy Rowe. How I have loved spending time with you.

Tom Mathews says

Lee Smith's Fair and Tender Ladies portrays better than any other book I have ever read, the hopes and joys, and trials and tribulations of a life spent in the hills and hollows of Appalachia. Told in epistolary style using letters written to friends and family of Ivy Rowe, a girl born at the dawn of the 20th century up Sugar Fork on Blue Star Mountain in Western Virginia. Hers is a story rich in the vibrant history of the Scots Irish settlers who carved out a tenuous foothold in the wilderness on the western fringes of a new nation, bringing with them their music, stories, folk traditions and even their love of home-made spirits.

Ivy's story spans four wars and decades of boom and bust as first the loggers and then the coal companies take move in and then pull out once they have taken all they can. It saw the introduction of roads, automobiles, electricity, radios and countless other changes yet it remains a very insular story that tells of childhood, courtships, marriages, births and deaths, all taking place amid the never-ending struggle to make a living in a beautiful but inhospitable land.

My thanks to Miss Scarlett (Diane Barnes) and the folks at the On the Southern Literary Trail group for giving me the opportunity to read and discuss this and many other fine books. I confess that I did not intend to read this book but this stellar review by our fearless moderator, Lawyer, changed my mind. Thanks Mike, I owe you one.

In closing, Fair and Tender Ladies receives my highest recommendation. If you are wondering whether or not you should read it, stop wondering and start reading.

BTW: Those who enjoy audio recordings of their books will be very pleased with Kay Forbes' narration although you will miss out on a lot of Ivy's creative spelling.

Chrissie says

This book is special. The cover may give you the impression that this is fluff. It is not!

It is set in the Appalachians of Virginia. It covers the 1900s through to the 70s. Both wars and the Depression. Yet history is not the focus even if it of course plays a role in shaping events. The focus is a family, the family of Ivy Rowe. She has six siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, friends and her own five kids. They get married, and they have kids. Each one of these becomes a person you know. Not once was I confused about who was who! Ivy thought she would become a writer, but she never did. Yet she did, in her own way, because what we are reading are her letters to friends and those in her family. Her whole life is told through these letters. I never imagined that such a complete, heartrending and delightful story could possibly be told through only letters! She reveals her innermost thoughts in letters that are not sent, and thus in this way we get the truth. I would never have trusted only letters to friends and family, because don't we hide stuff from each other?!

What is so special about this book is

- the writing. Ivy expresses herself simply and honestly and beautifully. Great writing. Beautiful lines and lines to ponder.
- the in-depth character portrayals. Each character becomes someone you know well. Each one is a mix of good and bad. Ivy tells all. She thinks, she simply cannot stop thinking. We watch her from early youth to old age. Through these letters we learn of her life and the life of those close to her. At the end when she is old, you don't want her to die. You cannot bear to lose her. Through her you think of your own life.
- the accurate and detailed picture drawn of a "mountain girl's" life in the South. Gorgeous writing about rural places - mountains and creeks and hollers. You don't know what a holler is? In the Appalachians this word is used for a valley region between two hills or mountains, often with a creek. Southern expressions and dialect create a feeling of place.

The audiobook narration by Kate Forbes was superb. This is one of those cases where listening to the book is better than just reading it. The dialect and sound you hear further enhance the atmosphere. You hear as Ivy ages, scarcely noting that her voice has changed! Never hard to follow and a great choice for those who have little experience with audiobooks.

When I close this book I am sad because it is over.

I will be grabbing more by this author. My next will be her memoir: Dimestore: A Writer's Life.
