



The Story of Land and Sea

Katy Simpson Smith

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Set in a small coastal town in North Carolina during the waning years of the American Revolution, this incandescent debut novel follows three generations of family—fathers and daughters, mother and son, master and slave, characters who yearn for redemption amidst a heady brew of war, kidnapping, slavery, and love.

Drawn to the ocean, ten-year-old Tabitha wanders the marshes of her small coastal village and listens to her father's stories about his pirate voyages and the mother she never knew. Since the loss of his wife Helen, John has remained land-bound for their daughter, but when Tab contracts yellow fever, he turns to the sea once more. Desperate to save his daughter, he takes her aboard a sloop bound for Bermuda, hoping the salt air will heal her.

Years before, Helen herself was raised by a widowed father. Asa, the devout owner of a small plantation, gives his daughter a young slave named Moll for her tenth birthday. Left largely on their own, Helen and Moll develop a close but uneasy companionship. Helen gradually takes over the running of the plantation as the girls grow up, but when she meets John, the pirate turned Continental soldier, she flouts convention and her father's wishes by falling in love. Moll, meanwhile, is forced into marriage with a stranger. Her only solace is her son, Davy, whom she will protect with a passion that defies the bounds of slavery.

In this elegant, evocative, and haunting debut, Katy Simpson Smith captures the singular love between parent and child, the devastation of love lost, and the lonely paths we travel in the name of renewal.

The Story of Land and Sea Details

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Author : Katy Simpson Smith

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From Reader Review The Story of Land and Sea for online ebook

Claire says

Exquisite writing, but there is something fundamental missing.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This book was discussed on Episode 054 of the Reading Envy Podcast. I was expecting more pirates but still found this to be an interesting tale of Beaufort, SC, prior to and during the American Revolution, focusing on the lives of three women.

Elizabeth says

Melancholic read about life's disappointments and the pain of living. Bleak but with intelligent writing (though I wondered a bit about the choice of present tense). I waffled between giving this 2 or 3 stars.

Julia says

Can't I give it zero stars? It was like the author wanted the prose to sound pretty but didn't really care that the plot was tedious and depressing and her characters were uninteresting. A main character dies rendering that whole section pointless, the plots lines are disjointed and I was bored, bored, bored. Bored. I love historical fiction (which this was billed as) but THIS is NOT historical fiction. It's an author looking to write "literature." How about we write something readable next time.

Becky says

For ten years now John has raised his daughter, Tabitha, alone. His beloved wife, Helen, died in childbirth leaving the two of them to fend for themselves. And now Tabitha has taken ill. The doctor says there's nothing to do but wait and John's father-in-law says that he must pray. But John knows exactly what will heal his daughter - the same sea air that his Helen once thrived in.

Wow, what a freaking downer of a book! That is not what I was in the mood for at all.

Katy Simpson Smith's fiction debut is set in Beaufort around the time of the Revolutionary War. It first tells the tale of John and Tabitha, then jumps back in time to introduce Helen before bouncing back to John and Helen's father. The Story of Land and Sea is not a straightforward narrative, but instead turned out to be little nuggets of story pieced together to make a whole. So rather than a smooth read it's very jarring and segmented.

The good thing about it is that it's fairly short. The bad thing about it, for me, is that I didn't really like it. Actually, the tale is interesting but the way it's told just didn't hook me.

Kyle says

I couldn't find anything to like about this book. None of the characters were interesting to me, none of them had any redeemable or even sympathetic qualities. For an historical novel written by someone with a doctorate in history, I found it devoid of historical specifics or any of the little special details that are supposed to make historical fiction interesting. The entire story was flat and featureless, sad and depressing.

Not recommended at all.

1/5

Melanie says

I received a free ARE copy from Harper Collins. And I really, really tried to like it: the jacket description sounded like something I would love. And I gave it a really good chance, completing the first two parts, but then got to Part 3 and am just not invested or interested enough to continue, and find out what happens. Once I found myself reading anything else but picking this up to finish, it was time to admit defeat and move on!

Elizabeth of Silver's Reviews says

THE STORY OF LAND AND SEA is beautifully written with exquisite prose.?

The main character is Helen whose story is told before and after her death along with the tale of her husband, her father, her daughter, and Moll, a slave from the plantation and Helen's friend.

You will follow the characters through their lives on a plantation, on a ship, and in a regular household. The characters are an odd sort but ones with depth and with feelings that ooze through the pages simply because of Ms. Smith's elegant writing style.

THE STORY OF LAND AND SEA takes the reader through complex situations with the reader being put directly into the story and being carried along with the characters and feeling every emotion especially their pain of loss.

I was a bit confused at first, but Ms. Smith writes so beautifully and so poignantly that you can't help but want to continue. THE STORY OF LAND AND SEA is a book unlike any other I have read simply because of the storyline and the time in history.?

?The confusion came about because of the time frame and order of dates. The book moves back and forth from past to present day in Helen and John's life but seemed to be out of order.

Despite the confusion, the book definitely will keep your interest and will keep you reading. Ms. Smith has

written a thoughtful book in a time period that I wasn't familiar with and therefore made THE STORY OF LAND AND SEA even more intriguing and interesting.

I would recommend this book solely on the premise of the marvelous writing style Ms. Smith has and the background she gave as to why she wrote the book. The beauty of the reason Ms. Smith wrote the book makes THE STORY OF LAND AND SEA a stunning debut. 4/5 (See her video below)

This book was given to me free of charge and without compensation by the publisher in return for an honest review.?

Marit says

A novel at once delicate and straightforward in its treatment of relationships, love, and loss. Simpson Smith tells of the intricate and often uncomfortable interactions between a distant father who discovers he wants to love his family too late, a man whose child becomes the lodestar in his life, a slave woman who holds herself ruthlessly apart from affection but cannot help but care for even her white mistress, and a religiously righteous young woman who moves from staunch independence to fall in love with a former pirate and soldier. This book is lonesome and vast, like the land and sea after which it is named. My only critique came from an ending that confused me in terms of timing and meaning.

karen says

Regret only exists once the opportunity for change is gone.

this novel set in north carolina during the years 1771-1794, and is split into three separate narratives. it is a very quiet story, with some lovely writing in it, but i'm having difficulty trying to understand its "why." i see where there are references and flare-ups between the stories, but i'm struggling to find its cohesive purpose. all i really have is that it is a very subdued story about faith and duty and sacrifice and family, specifically parenthood. and about the small disappointments parents feel when their children grow into people different than they anticipated. and about mind-boggling spur-of-the-moment decisions based on impulsive emotion rather than long-term practicality and how some things only make sense in novels and that's where i start getting frustrated.

again, lovely writing, when describing the difference between a love whose foundation is faith in a careless and cruel god whose motives are obscure, and one more grounded in the corporeal:

He'd left the letter next to Helen's miniature in the parlor, where Asa would notice it. The older man always sought out the little painting on his visits, holding it when he could. He had a possessiveness in him that encompassed his house, his land, his women. And whatever didn't belong to him belonged to God. Asa would be happy to have the girl in heaven, might consider it safer than Beaufort, but John has no such faith. He could not leave his daughter's body with a man who would not mind it, whose vision of God implied the reclamation of his flock. John believes in flesh. His love survives no transubstantiation.

or the logic behind giving a ten-year-old girl her very own slave as a birthday present:

Helen is nothing like her mother, who was exactly the sort to be married well and loved calmly. Perhaps she would have taught her some of this passivity. But Helen's only mothers have been substitutes: the teacher, the cook, the slave. If she can't have a woman to hold her and love her, she should have a woman to order around. Moll, at least, will give her the pride and responsibility of stewardship. His daughter must be tamed enough to bring a husband and heir to the land, but otherwise her whims are of little concern to him.

or this passage that loses something when taken out of context, but it actually quite romantic:

She reaches for his hand. It's warm and dry, and she remembers for the first time his fingers on her mouth. She cannot bear the thought of leaving this island, the kindling fort. There is nothing she is not afraid of.

"You wrote so little," she says.

"You wrote of farming," he says.

She will go with him anywhere.

but overall it's the kind of writing that's never really resonated with me, not without some incredible storytelling to go along with it; some overarching theme or message or takeaway. the only unifying theme i can see binding the stories is disappointment. in expectations thwarted by god or family. in how the way we see the future can be drastically altered by illness and death, love, or the plans of those we have tied our imagined future to.

i'm certain to be in the minority with my tepid reaction to this one. read will's review for a more enthusiastic response and don't listen to silly old karen.

Melinda says

There are books that are suspenseful or romantic or funny....*The Story of Land and Sea* is beautiful.

I was immediately drawn in by Smith's writing. Her voice is surprisingly lyrical for a debut author and, if nothing else, I'm glad that this book introduced me to her work. She was able to vividly recreate the world of late 18th-century North Carolina so well that it made me homesick for the years I spent living in that part of the country.

The characters quickly became dear to my heart. We have John, the ex-Pirate (yes!) turned soldier, his vivacious wife Helen, his spunky daughter Tab, and his widowed father-in-law, Asa. Along with this family, we have Moll, the slave given to Helen when they were both children, and her oldest son, Davy. Each and every character came to life as I read and I fell a bit in love with each and every one of them.

This book is more a study than it is a story. Smith takes her time to really delve into each and every relationship in this book--and not a single one of them is simple. However, in exchange, this is not a strongly-plotted novel. Personally, I'm fine with that--I would choose a character-driven book over a plot-driven book any day of the week.

However, because of that, I feel I can't give this book the 5 stars that it was for me. I suspect that some readers may be frustrated with the less-developed plot, especially if they are more interested in the story than

the characters. On the other hand, those who put more stock in well developed characters and setting would likely fall in love with this book as I did.

I received a copy of this book in return for an honest review. I received no other compensation for this post.

Mississippi Library Commission says

The Story of Land and Sea by Katy Simpson Smith is a beautifully written story of the love that passes between parent and child, and the devastation when that love is lost. We highly recommend Smith's debut novel.

Ashley says

I am stunned that this averages a starred review of 2.99 on GoodReads. That's crap. The thing with this book is that it is split in to three parts and each part tells a different story. The first part is the story of John and his daughter, Tabitha. The second part is the story of John's wife Helen as a child. The third part is the story of John. It disrupted me slightly when it shifted from part one to part two but I stuck with it. I had loved part one and I wanted to love it again so I kept reading hoping it would recapture my attention and it did. If I were to rate the parts separately I would rate them as part 1, part 3, part 2 because I really didn't love Helen's solo story although I didn't dislike it. As the days go by I love this book more and more. It's sad, but it's fantastic. I loved it and it's worth reading especially if you're a fan of the literary fiction genre.

Will Byrnes says

**...to save her from the graveyard he must take her to the sea. He took her mother once,
and being on the water only made her bloom.**

In 1793 ten-year-old Tabitha is smitten with the idea of the sea. Her father, John, an erstwhile pirate, and soldier in the Continental Army, owns a shop in Beaufort, NC. Tab's affection for the maritime may have to do with her mother, Helen. John and Helen had eloped, over her father's objections, and sailed together under a black flag. But her father's tales are all Tab has of her mother, who died giving birth to her. When Tab contracts yellow fever John is desperate to find a way to help his daughter. They board a ship bound for Bermuda. This does not sit well with her grandfather, who believes her chances are best ashore, and well prayed over. Asa owns a plantation, producing turpentine from considerable stands of pines. A religious sort, he is hell-bent on making sure that his legacy is carried forward. When *his* wife died in childbirth, he focused that need on his daughter. But his attempts to root her to his land failed when she fell in love with John, a man of not much family, but an excellent heart.

The story is told in three parts, beginning with Tabitha's struggle. Part two goes back to Asa raising Helen, giving her a slave, Moll, for her birthday, and the complicated relationship between Moll and Helen. While the comparison falls very short, both Moll and Helen are chained to their roles in life. Both resent their restrictions. But only Helen can actually act on her desires without being scourged for it. Asa is chained to his land and his attitudes, unable to see past what is to what might be, and unwilling to see beyond self-

serving adages to what is right, to ever loosen himself from his own bindings.

Part three returns to John and Asa, Moll, and her son, Davy. It goes into how each of the primary characters ultimately copes or tries to cope, with the challenges of their lives, their losses, and chances.

Katy Simpson Smith has more than enough background for undertaking a look at America in the late 18th century. Before she returned to school to get her MFA, she completed a doctorate in history, and has published an examination of motherhood, *We Have Raised All of You: Motherhood in the South, 1750-1835*, which covers the period on display in her novel.

The author

It was a hard knock life for women in late 18th century America. Not only was the risk from childbirth far greater than it is today, even past that life-threatening event women were treated as chattel. Not to the same extent as actual slaves, but to a significant degree.

He [Asa] had a possessiveness in him that encompassed his house, his land, his women

And he would use marriage as a way to shackle both his daughter and her slave to his land. And what of the reverberations of the lot of females to those around them? Increased peril for their children, for one. Strained existence for their survivors, both emotionally and materially. And various forms of torment as the storms that rise from imprisonment bring forth dark gales. Parents are taken from children and children are taken from parents by the foolishness of custom, the limitations of ignorance and the blind eye of fate.

Thematically there is a lot going on here. Property views figure large. Asa considers Helen a form of property and takes as little heed of her wishes as he does of those of her slave, Moll. Marriage and choice come in for some consideration. Within that larger theme, both Moll and Helen confront the conflict between who their respective *owners* want them to marry and what they want for themselves.

**“I wouldn’t mind if I had some say in who I laid down with.” [says Helen’s slave, Moll]
Helen nods. She puts her chin in her hands, nodding. People want what isn’t given to them. And this is not sin, but hope.
What if God didn’t put us here to accept, but to struggle? Isn’t love itself built on that precise impossible hope?**

It is also clear that love is not always allowed to be the greatest consideration in choosing a mate, or to define one’s relationship with a mate after the marriage is made.

**“Do you miss your husband, Mrs Randolph?” He had died looking for free land in the frontier, shot through with a Cherokee arrow. His partner had buried him in the west and sent Mrs. Randolph his musket and his spectacles. The gun she keeps hung behind her cabin door, where all the little Randolphs know to find it.
“I mostly miss the money he brought in, to speak frankly. He was a good father to the little ones and did well by us, but there’s something rather nice about one’s own life. Making decisions without someone to tell you ‘no, best not do that.’ He never thought I could do much for myself.”
“We’re lucky to have you,” Helen says.
“There’s no telling what all I can do without him, miss.**

There is a tautness to this relatively brief novel. The concept of Checkov's gun is well implemented. A beaten slave in one scene is employed relevantly in another. A notion of escape by boat is recommended and no sooner done than an actual boat appears. Sometimes this seemed a bit *too* neat. As is the bludgeoning irony of Asa freeing a panicked bird that is trapped in his house, while denying freedom to enslaved humans.

On the first page of the novel, John interrupts Tabitha's request for more information about her mother.

He looks down the hall at the shadows whipping across the slats and holds a finger to his lips. "Can you hear any birds?"

This certainly gives one the notion that birds might be related to souls of the dead, or shadows. Could be something else entirely of course. Birds might be functioning as a sort of Greek chorus. In any case, you might want to keep this in mind as you come across the many bird references throughout the book. Land references abound as well, as wood is noted many a time, particularly pine, and flowers.

The writing in *The Story of Land and Sea* is beautiful, moving, and insightful. The story begins:

On days in August when sea storms bite into the North Carolina coast, he drags a tick mattress into the hall and tells his daughter stories, true and false, about her mother. The wooden shutters clatter, and Tabitha folds blankets around them to build a softness for the storm. He always tells of their courting days, of her mother's shyness. She looked like a straight tall pine from a distance, only when he got close could he see her trembling. "Was she scared?" "Happy," John says. "We were both happy."

There is plenty more where that came from.

The Story of Land and Sea is a sturdy vessel that will take you to places worth seeing. This is one boat you won't want to miss.

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This review has been cross-posted at Cootsreviews.com

=====EXTRA STUFF

The book opens with an abridged version of an Isaac Watts hymn about the joys of heaven offering one a reason not to fear death. It seems an odd intro, given that the focus in the tale is, to a large degree, about the impact of death on those left behind (no, not in the Tim LeHaye way) with no assurance of a heavenly reward waiting. Perhaps it was intended ironically. In any case, the hymn is beautifully set to music by Red Mountain Music here.

From mentalfloss.com – The Historical Horror of Childbirth

The author's site is now up.

A nifty interview with the author on NPR on 8/22/14

Mary says

There's some lovely writing here, but the story itself is quiet, so subtle that the emotional moments were really lacking in vibrancy, and I felt disconnected from the characters. I disliked the disjointed structure of the book, and knowing the tragedies up front made me less inclined to finish it. I read Parts I and II, and I don't need to read Part III to tell it's, sadly, not the book for me.
