

Philadelphia Inquirer Nov. 12, 1989

ORDINARY LOVE & GOOD WILL

Two Novellas

By Jane Smiley

Alfred A. Knopf. 197 pp.

Jane Smiley's seventh book so superbly weds the cardinal virtues of fiction—gripping plot, richly textured characters, beautiful prose and profundity of insight—that it leaves no doubt she has reached the top echelon of contemporary writers.

Our best fiction writers seem to reach full maturity by progressing through three stages. First, the gifted novice graced with verbal facility and flair for plot, waiting only for something to say. Then, grown ripened by life toward human empathy, the writer learns to penetrate and reveal character. Many good writers never advance further. Those time will reward most, however, rise to a level where some pattern becomes visible in events, a synchronicity, an interdependence of thing and things.

The two novellas in this book show stunning command of style, plot and character. But it is the compassion and sagacious vision at their core that places them among the best fiction of this, or any, year.

Told in present tense voices that in each case suggest their events remain unfinished, linked by the haunting certainty that the sins of even the most devoted parent can forever visit pain on both parent and child, these are otherwise distinctly different kinds of stories.

In "Ordinary Love," the title itself a fertile oxymoron, Rachel Kinsella is reunited for a weekend with her adult children. The 52 year-old accountant is, above all else, a loving mother. More than 20 years earlier, her favorite moment of the day came while lying in bed nursing her twin sons while her other three children cuddled beneath her blankets. Their father was a moody physician who loved order and passion with equal intensity and made Rachel feel suffocated, "the Visible Woman, always being told what she was like and what it meant." Filled with wanderlust in her youth, her stifling marriage made her "intransigently and loudly unambitious."

So, despite an ill mother and demanding husband, somewhere in her crowded day of caring for five small children while remodeling her house she made time to start an affair with a neighbor, a much traveled writer, wanting "not to love him but to be him." After lovemaking, she would lie next to him and think of her kids. Precipitously, she tells her husband of these trysts because, "I wanted him to know I wasn't his." He knocks her to their new floor and kicks her out. When she calls a week later, he has stealthfully removed their children to England. She does not see any of them for a year.

Husband and children gone, she finds herself suddenly deserted by her lover as well. "When people leave," Rachel says, "they always seem to scoop themselves out of

you." She is left with deep hollow places, unable to trust the love of a man ever again because she knows love is composed inseparably of terror and desire and "both the terror and desire will be fulfilled, and equally."

Now, 20 years later, her reunion with her children echoes some of the disorientation she'd felt when she saw them again after their flight to England. She struggles to believe they are simply a normal mother and children bonded by ordinary love, forming "a picture of survival next to a picture of betrayal," that they are safe again together.

She wants them to know her now as "an adult woman, but an adult woman in every way," sharing with them details of her life with their father. Mother and children fill in gaps in each others' knowledge, ordinary and extraordinary, while with deadly psychological insight Smiley unfolds Rachel's deepest fears and deepest longings growing fulfilled, and equally.

If in "Ordinary Love" Smiley is the consummate psychologist, in "Good Will" she is the riveting storyteller. Bob Miller lives near State College, Pennsylvania on an annual income of \$343.67. He eats purslane, blackberries and angelica, and his biggest expense after property taxes is flour. The goal of his ascetic lifestyle is to be "self-contained, not isolated or hostile." He built his house and made almost everything in it. As the story opens, he boasts of his austerity to a writer interviewing him and his wife, Liz.

Of all the objects he has made, the one he feels most self-congratulatory about is his 8 year-old son, Tommy. The boy dogs his father's steps, eager to please, even more eager to fit unobtrusively into the world around him.

But Smiley, in both stories, suggests that fathers love differently than mothers. While maternal love in this book is always unconditional, fathers love with ulterior concern for approval that they have created something admirable. The father's is the love "of a true ego-maniac, whose wife and children and dogs are the limbs of his own body." Having surrendered his attachment to things, Miller has reinvested it in a more devastating attachment to pride. Tommy is less his freely loved son than his "experimental subject." Miller will learn with gut-wrenching power the price of ulterior parenting.

Written in a prose so liquid it flows down the page, these tales combine the surface realism of their closely observed details with the percipient depth of their author's insight. Each continues to resonate long after the last page is turned.