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Guests on Earth

Lee Smith
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Mental hospital where Zelda Fitzgerald spent her last days provides real-life backdrop to tale of lust among the lost … and shock therapy.

Highland, “a famous, progressive hospital” in Asheville, North Carolina, the setting for Southern writer Lee Smith’s new novel, was known for its emphasis on diet and exercise to treat mental illness—and for its use of Metrazol convulsion treatment, also known as shock therapy.

Lee Smith has crafted an evocative tale that runs parallel to real life. Fictional heroine Evalina Toussaint is a piano prodigy who falls into depression after her dissolute mother dies from the ravages of opium. Evalina ends up in Highland, and her talent puts her in the clinic’s music ensemble, near to the beautiful but fragile Zelda Fitzgerald, legendary casualty of the Roaring Twenties. Evalina’s occasional sightings of Zelda form the backbone of the book, though Evalina’s own story is dramatic enough: she flees Highland when she fears she will be given shock therapy. Abandoned and pregnant, she receives the therapy and gradually finds her way back to reality and into the arms of a woolly lad known, not inappropriately, as Pan. The story ends with the famous fire that killed Zelda and seven other inmates, symbolically locked in a tower of the architecturally remarkable hospital.

Smith is careful to keep her regional readers happy, with such folkish motifs as Evalina singing “Pretty Polly” while Pan plunks a guitar, just before they make love on a straw pallet. These rustic touches are balanced with glimpses of Zelda and Scott scampering off to the opulent Grove Park Inn for holiday celebrations, and the constant reminders of the luxury of Highland itself.

Smith holds Zelda, an author who never got the fame she deserved and who retreated into alcoholism, at arm’s length; we see her more through Evalina’s conversations with fellow inmates and keepers than through direct interaction. One female character says of Zelda: “Oh she’s been in and out, back and forth, of course, poor thing. She will never leave this hospital entirely, not that one. … She was too smart … she didn’t fit in. That’s the case with half of them, the women that comes here.” Such insights gleam in what could have been a shorter book, a bit burdened, perhaps, by too many side stories.

Zelda is a tragic figure, her death is an unsolved mystery, and Highland is a perfect setting for lust among the lost with the horrors of Metrazol giving it a Gothic edge. With this book, Smith will broaden her readership to draw in those fascinated by the Fitzgerald ethos while entertaining her perennial fans with the local lore and down home accents behind the scenes.

BARBARA BAMBERGER SCOTT (August 31, 2013)

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