



## The Clever Mill Horse

**Jodi Lew-Smith**

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*Filled with danger, science, and suspense, this story rings true with historical and natural detail.*

With *The Clever Mill Horse*, Jodi Lew-Smith presents a kaleidoscopic glimpse of early America through the struggle of a young woman to honor her grandfather's dream and free her family from a tyrannical father.

Ella Kenyon feels most at home in the forests of upstate New York, where she has learned from a former Oneida Indian scout how to track game and throw a knife. She also spends a great deal of her time in her grandfather's workshop, bound by a promise she made at age fifteen to see his invention, a machine that extracts the linen fiber from raw flax, through to completion. Unfulfilled, that promise has "dogged her steps like a mangy hound who keeps to the shadows but can't be ignored." Upon her discovery that a local businessman is attempting to pirate her patent drawings, Ella embarks on an odyssey, much of it on horseback, to find her missing grandfather, repair a flaw in the machine's design, and become the first in a race to file an application for a patent on the invention.

This first book of a series is intricately plotted and exceedingly well paced. Ella and her companions discover much and endure much on their journey. They visit a family of rural homesteaders and a Seneca Indian village, and they travel to the industrial settlement of Glassboro and the heavily forested "Pines" region of coastal New Jersey; then they take on the urban maze of Philadelphia, and later, Washington, DC, home of the still-under-construction US Patent Office. Throughout the changing landscapes, ecologies, and cultures, Lew-Smith, a farmer, a wife and mother, and a professional with a doctorate in plant genetics, is an able guide. She immerses her characters in the animal and plant life of their environs, exploring both the traditional agrarian roots and the budding industrial potential of the new America. At the same time, she aptly ratchets the emotional stakes for Ella.

In Ella, Lew-Smith brings forth a tomboyish but decidedly female character who must make hard choices and take decisive action. Ella complements, rather than clashes with, her more traditional sister, Jenny. One of Ella's companions is Zeke, and while Zeke and Ella are not a couple, the book floats the suggestion that Zeke may yet play a larger role in Ella's life as the series unfolds.

Lew-Smith runs the several story lines in this novel to unexpected, yet fitting, resolutions. By itself, this is a complete and finely polished first novel.

JOE TAYLOR (Fall 2014)

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