

Times Like These

E. E. Smith

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The Smiths might have been the perfect American family: Mom, Dad, and two children—all chasing a dream or two. But the comparisons end there (or do they?), when Dad, George “Paddy” Smith, drinks his way out of a few jobs and his marriage, and Mom, Rosa, leaves the family for another man.

Meanwhile narrator Evelyn, the Smiths’ younger daughter, longs simply for a house that rings “with joy and laughter.” Instead they wind up in a noisy, absurd agent’s quarters at a train depot, surrounded by a transient cast of railroad characters.

In her fictional autobiography, the follow-up to *Boardinghouse Stew*, E.E. Smith leaves her girlhood home of Sacramento to follow her parents to their new Western Pacific railroad jobs in Shafter, Nevada (an ironic name for the little town, since they are all about to get the “shaft,” in one way or another). As Evelyn begins her new life in Shafter, population twenty-five, you’d think the thirteen-year-old might get a little bored. But as we learned in *Boardinghouse Stew*, Evelyn isn’t afraid to mix it up with the locals.

There’s tough Dallas native, Laura, who’ll become Evelyn’s best friend, old coalman Mr. McKnight, a displaced actor who recites Shakespeare, general store owner Joe Thomas, blind schoolmarm Mrs. Hoppe, a group of Mexican gamblers, and the little Spanish-speaking Nita Hernandez, whom Evelyn must take under wing. When she’s not suffering through Mrs. Hoppe’s incompetent classes, Evelyn is riding her horse, hopping trains, ending a bar fight, or out at the movies with Laura, anything to avoid the weary, nitpicking ways of her unhappy mother.

Evelyn knows well her father’s drinking problem and covers for him when he fails to show up for work, or passes out on the job, missing important train messages on his telegraph key. She can only care for him for so long, and in those absent hours, a train crashes and George Smith—despite his many friends on the railroad—must find a new job. And that means sending Evelyn off to another state (Iowa!), school, and host family, when her mother, Rosa, runs off with Archibald Denney, the replacement telegrapher.

Interestingly, in all this chaos, Evelyn finds a way to get her classmates to learn something, acting, as she writes her first play to spice up Mrs. Hoppe’s failing lessons. It is the uncertainty and heartbreak in *Times Like These* that gives America a fine playwright and novelist in E.E. Smith.

And, encouragingly, she lets us know at the end of *Times Like These* that part three in this exciting and absorbing series may be coming soon.

BRANDON STICKNEY (October 12, 2011)

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