

*Ten Days in the Hills* by Jane Smiley (faber & faber)

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Giovanni Boccaccio wrote his *Decameron* in 1350, just after the Black Death. Ten well-to-do Florentines escape the plague by fleeing into the hills; here, in a beautifully appointed villa, they wile away the time and sit out the plague by, for ten days, each telling one story. Many, though by no means all, of these stories are notorious for their bawdiness.

As the title of Jane Smiley's latest novel hints, she has appropriated this device – rather as she appropriated Shakespeare's *King Lear* for her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Thousand Acres*.

Smiley's ten people are not Florentines, but Los Angelinos; and if Los Angeles can be said to have a class of nobles, these would belong to that class. The owner of the mansion in the hills is Max, a writer-director who won an Oscar long time ago but has not made a film recently. Staying with him is his lover of one year's standing, Elena, a super-competent but anxious woman who is writing a book called *Here's How: To do EVERYTHING Correctly!*

Like Boccaccio's work, Smiley's is divided up according to the days. Day One is Monday, March 24, 2003, which is the morning after the Oscar ceremony (which Max and Elena of course attended). It also happens to be the beginning of the war in Iraq, which in terms of the Boccacian parallel would then equal the Black Death.

The first two guests to arrive are in fact literally fleeing the war: Max's ex-wife, Zoe, a celebrated singer-actress, turns up with her new lover, Paul, a taciturn and possibly flaky spiritual healer, en route to a Buddhist monastery where they intend to sit out the war.

Like much of America, they naively believe that the war will soon be over. Finding Max's accommodation all in all more comfortable than a monastery, they stay on. Zoe's mother, a Jamaican called Delphine, has survived the divorce and has stayed behind on Max's property. Her best friend, Cassie, an art dealer, lives next-door, but somehow also settles in, as does Stoney, Max's agent, who lives down the road, but claims his floors are being redone. He is in fact here to pursue his affair with Isabel, Max's daughter by Zoe. Simon, Elena's dashing son, is far too comfortable here to leave for college, where he is a graphic arts student.

Completing the ménage is Charlie, a childhood friend of Max's, who is embarrassingly at odds with all Max's present attachments: he is, for a start, in favour of the war.

I am not betraying any plot secrets here: all this Smiley establishes with rare economy in her opening pages, and then devotes the remaining 440 pages or so to the complex interactions of these ten highly individualised people. They talk and they make love, often at the same time – and Smiley somehow manages to make the love-making almost as interesting as the conversation. Her descriptions are minutely graphic, but she avoids the clichés and the repetitiveness of pornography. Her characters are as inventive and as agile in love-making as in argument, though not magically endowed: Max, at 58, has some performance anxiety, for instance, which he hopes may be ascribed to the war. Smiley in her public utterances is a vehement opponent of the Iraq war; she is on record as saying that in a just society the Bush administration would be marched out and shot. Here, she of course avails herself of her novelistic privilege by delivering, mainly

through Elena, some choice invective against the war and its perpetrators; but she also does her novelistic duty by giving the supporters of the war a hearing – admittedly mainly through Charlie, who is in various ways the least attractive character in the novel. Apart from the war, which the company tries unsuccessfully to avoid by not reading newspapers, and the various couplings taking place, the characters of course, like their Boccacian antecedents, tell stories.

Here Smiley is at her most inventive, coming up with a wealth of different anecdotes, as varied as Boccaccio's, and sometimes quite as bawdy. But since these people are all directly or indirectly connected with the film industry, their talk is obsessively about movies (even Simon is appearing in a student porn movie, in which he plays the part of a penis, for which role he has shaven his head). Not the least of the pleasure of this novel, at any rate for film enthusiasts, is the constant reference to films, contemporary as well as classic. The characters clearly to various degrees see their lives in cinematic terms – which is after all just a specialised form of narrative.

If there's a moral to the book, it's the one pronounced, surprisingly, by Charlie: "My own story is very big to me – the marriage and the kids, and the house we built, and the separation, and now my cholesterol levels ... but coming out here puts it in perspective and makes me know it's just a story. You know, eight million stories in the naked city." Just a story – but Smiley tells each story as if it mattered, and in the end, of course, they do matter to the characters. And because she makes the characters matter to us, so do their stories.