



# The Last Girls

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## **The Last Girls** Lee Smith

Revered for her powerful female characters, Lee Smith tells a perceptive story of how college pals who grew up in an era when they were still called "girls" have negotiated life as women. Harriet Holding is a hesitant teacher who has never married (she can't explain why, even to herself). Courtney Gray struggles to escape her Southern Living lifestyle. Catherine Wilson, a sculptor, is suffocating in her happy third marriage. Anna Todd is a world-famous romance novelist escaping her own tragedies through her fiction. And finally there is Baby, the girl they come to bury - along with their memories of her rebellions and betrayals.

## **The Last Girls Details**

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Author : Lee Smith

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Genre : Fiction, American, Southern, Womens Fiction, Chick Lit

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## From Reader Review The Last Girls for online ebook

### **Lisa Hall says**

This book had an interesting premise and started out well. Characters were drawn well. However, the book never really gained momentum. Hints were dropped in flashbacks which never quite came together. I kept expecting the book to build into something. You spend time with characters who appear to change yet you leave without really knowing what change has occurred or whether this trip down memory lane will have lasting consequences for this group. Overall, the book left a hollow feeling.

The most telling scene in the book does not even involve "the girls." In an inelegant stab at explaining the book, an employee of the ship explains to a husband that the steamboat cruise nears New Orleans, then doubles back to circle an island and return back down the river. He states the change in direction happens so slowly that most guests don't even notice the cruise's ruse to make the trip seem longer than it actually is. Circling around without getting anywhere, much like the characters of this book.

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### **Kris says**

I cannot begin to express my disappointment in this book. I was so excited to find a book written about my life long dream of floating down the Mississippi on a homeade raft (yeah-I'm serious). It had so much potential and it bombed, there was like one scene about the rafting and the whole book was so woe is me I almost threw it into the ocean (I read it on a spring break trip). Do not read this book

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### **Holly Mueller says**

After reading some of the not-so-favorable reviews, I realized listening to the audio version of this story might have enhanced my experience! The narrator is so perfect. She has a rich Southern drawl, and had just the right amount of bittersweet and nostalgia in her voice - perfect for the mood of this book. I thought it was *The Big Chill* meets *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (after I said this to my mom, I saw that one reviewer called it *The Big Chill* meets *Huckleberry Finn* - ha). The story follows women who have come together in 1999 to re-create a trip down the Mississippi River like the one they took in college in 1965, in order to scatter the ashes of Baby Ballou, one of their friends, who was killed in a car accident. Between flashbacks and present-day thoughts/ events, each woman is given a full story. The book ends with the group giving Baby a goodbye ceremony, and Harriet, the character whose point of view started the book, deciding to embrace her life and live it to the fullest. I really loved listening to this book and would highly recommend the audio version.

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### **Dana says**

This is one of those books I chose because of its setting (the South), but approached with caution because of its initial similarity to a grown-up version of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*: a group of ladies with distinctly different personalities who are drawn together by a common bond. I was pleasantly surprised that the characters of the book were much less one-dimensional than I had originally expected. I personally identified most with Catherine, the artist from Alabama. I was also quite curious about the unfolding plot

around Harriet's back story. However, I found Anna's character the LEAST believable, and even, for lack of a better description: gaudy and annoying. The character of Baby was at first intriguing, but then she also became annoying. And Courtney's situation, finding love with a chubby pretending-to-be-gay Elvis impersonator? Give me a break. Not believable. At. All. I also often found myself thinking, "Rich white girls' problems." Even with the aforementioned not so favorable comments, I would probably recommend this to someone as a beach read, but not for a significant intellectual stimulation. Perhaps someone my mother's age, or a little older, who was raised in the South, who had a lot of money, would better identify. Or maybe not.

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### **Leah says**

This is based on a group of girls from an all-girls college. It plays into the stereotypical 1950's view of women having a wasted life if they do not get married or have children. Its probably supposed to have a metaphor about life, but I missed it. So much potential and yet the book fell short. I did enjoy the writing style, which is the only reason I read the whole book. SKIP IT.

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### **Val says**

Simply marvelous book. I absolutely could not put it down once I started it. Every time I had to break from it: to sleep, to bathe, to go out to lunch with my mother and kids....it was agony. It is a lengthy book but even with these (necessary?) interruptions I managed to complete it in about 30 hours.

If anyone ever attended a women's college in a small southern town you will feel right at home in these pages so wonderfully crafted by Lee Smith. I did. I graduated from Brenau Women's College in Gainesville, Georgia in 1989 with a degree in English just like these characters. There is nothing, nothing like an old women's college in the South that is steeped in tradition. I am familiar with Hollins on a slight level (where Lee Smith attended and was the basis for her inspiration.) I applied there, and was seriously considering attending there—but my parents felt it was too far away from Georgia so I ended up only two hours away instead of around a dozen.

I could relate to every single one of these female characters—it was like there was a little of me in every single one of them. Another thing I have done while reading this book is I have drug Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (my 1955 edition), which is most likely the one the characters would have read.

And most interestingly, in the beginning of Twain's haunting tale is the line on the first page: "NOTICE: Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be persecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR"  
~~Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

And so it delights me so to hear the exchange between Anna and Harriett about plot in writing. There are many other areas about the original river journey and then this new river journey. I love how all characters hearken back to their English professors and what they learned from them, although Gaines was much younger at the time than they are now. I do the same thing. Forevermore, my English professors made such a mark on my attitudes regarding art, literature and writing—although I am as old now as they were then. It does not matter: they will always be the mentors that shaped me.

Please read this book. I honestly cannot wait to shelve it for a year or two and then read it all over again anew. Smith is an enchantress of writing: she deftly entwines tragic situations in the lives of all the

characters—all strong southern women with secrets—with very humorous comic relief—just at the right turn, at the right moment. Essentially, that is the southern way of life—crying one moment and laughing hysterically the next. One of my favorite scenes was when the women all grab a handful of Baby's ashes to throw over the side of the riverboat, releasing their dear college friend to the river only to have her spirited remains blow back on them in the wind.

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### **Michele says**

I was extremely disappointed with this book. The characters were poorly drawn. The point of view switched from one to another within a chapter. There were characters on the original boat trip who weren't included on the reunion trip - with no reason explained, and a bizarre mini-chapter at the end giving the reader information on them when the reader had never really heard of them to begin with. There was no reason to even have them as a part of the story at all. It should have been the five women on the raft, and then the four on the reunion trip - that would have made a lot more sense. And yet, there is time devoted to people who are seated at the dinner table of the characters for no reason at all. One character's husband has a point of view that is far more substantial in space (and possibly content) than the character herself - I felt that his point of view didn't contribute much.

Throughout the whole book, I kept asking 2 questions: 1) what was it about the trip that made them all agree to come back to do it again; 2) what happened to Baby that she wanted them to come together to do this? I was exceedingly disappointed to find only a few small passages of flashbacks that had anything to do with the rafting trip and that the trip was orchestrated by Baby's husband after her death.

I don't say this often, but I'm annoyed that I wasted my time reading this book.

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### **Lyndall Rae says**

Uhhh, one of the most boring books I've ever read. Didn't know what was going on half the time.

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### **Connie says**

First let me say I love Lee Smith's writing. She is masterful at peppering her characters with the Southern nuances, charms and language that is familiar to me and I love that. However, this was not the best "story" of hers I have read. She did the narration herself for the audio and the honey smooth drawl of the south she gave to these women may have helped the rating.

This is a great premise as it is the tale of college roommates, who took a raft trip down the Mississippi in the mid 60's. They were instant celebrities as their adventure was followed by the newspapers. (think of today's social media celebs) As one character states....they were called "girls" though in this day and age they would all have been "women". (I was interested in a comment I read that Smith based this part of the story on a raft trip she herself took with college friends)

Anyway, forward to the present day as these women again gather to travel the river...minus one member of their group. We learn of their lives thru their own turns at narrating the story. How they were as the young

girls, what their aspirations were, full of excitement about the future. Then what the future actually had held for them and where their lives had ended up. This nostalgic trip allowed each of them to recall who they once had been. My problem with this is that as young girls they had bonded even though they were very different, yet as women they remained rather cool and aloof. Most of them were actually rather sad to me. I liked the girls, the women not so much. kept waiting for them to become "real". They never connected and so to me the story felt disjointed.

Plus points for the beautiful language, the visuals of this river journey and the leftover thoughts of remembering myself as a young girl and reviewing my own then and now. Minus for characters who were a bit cold and fake and a story that just didn't come together.

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### **Sarah Sammis says**

I love the cover art, the title and the concept of the book. I just wish I had actually enjoyed reading *The Last Girls*. I kept waiting for the story to get started but it seemed bogged down incoherent flashbacks. The only progression the book managed was the river boat's slow trip down the Mississippi to New Orleans.

There's nothing wrong with a book made up of flashbacks. Many writers have done it successfully: Nabokov's *Lolita* and Knowles's *A Separate Peace* are both good examples. Or for a more contemporary example, Fforde's *Eyre Affair* uses extensive flashbacks to illustrate the present day world, explaining how it came to be, thus enriching Thursday Next's story. Lee's story should do the same thing but her many flashbacks never cover the adventure that brought the women together as friends. Instead her many flashbacks further divide up the characters keeping them separated into different boxes and chapters. It isn't until the very last chapter that she even attempts to explain why they have all decided to reunite for the river cruise!

After the death of a mutual friend, a group of women take one last journey together down the Mississippi to relieve a previous adventure they had shared and of course all the memories they had built together in their youth. It sounds like a story with great potential but it just isn't carried off. Throughout the book the present and past stories compete for page space so that neither one comes off in any coherent fashion. There is no room given for character growth and the protagonist is such a pushover that she never does anything to drive the plot except to reluctantly agree to do what everyone else tells her to do!

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### **Sara says**

3.5 stars rounded down.

I had real reservations opening this book. I had loved my introduction to Lee Smith so much and I heard from several sources that this book was not going to live up to my expectations at all. Agreed, this is no *Fair and Tender Ladies*, a book that will live in my heart and mind forever, but it is a good, solid read with an engrossing story and characters that seemed real and three-dimensional.

While in college, a group of girls decided to ride a raft, ala *Huckleberry Finn*, down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. Four of them have come back together many years later to honor the passing of the fifth and take another voyage down the river, albeit in a more comfortable style. The book is both a glimpse into who they were as college girls and who they have become as women. If you have ever belonged to a group of

friends and then moved on from them, but have never forgotten, you cannot help liking this book just on its face. I don't think it hurts that the time period is one I feel connected to as well.

*I have heard it said that the friends of our youth are the closest friends we will ever have, and I believe this to be true. Certainly it has been so for me. The boys of my childhood are the men I rely on now. For at no later time are we ever so open, so ready to offer up all that we have and all that we are, to allow others real access into our very souls. The friendships we make in later life are friendships of a different order, it seems to me.*

These girls/women are not all the same, but they are all uniquely Southern, and this is something that Lee Smith knows about and portrays well. You might wonder that two very poor girls would end up rooming with girls who are rolling in daddy's money, but I assure you it can happen. As a freshman, I was assigned a dorm room with a girl who was straight from the ritziest part of Atlanta, her house being a few doors down from the Governor's Mansion. I was a lower middle-class scholarship student, who worked an on-campus job. She was refined and easy with everything; I was scared and out of my depth, and I we got on famously...one of the sweetest, least snobby people I have ever known in my lifetime. I think that experience may well explain why I sank into these relationships without any reluctance at all.

I found the backstory more interesting than the current one, which seems always to be the case when I read books with varying timelines. The end was a bit anticlimactic, but it would have been very difficult to have written an end to this story that made sense and wouldn't have been so. All in all, a good effort, and a confirmation that I should continue to read Lee Smith's books, which is good news since I have two more slated for 2019.

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### **Stewart says**

"The Last Girls" is a fictional account of a cruise on a luxury steamboat down the Mississippi River in May 1999 by a group of women who went to college together in Virginia and who had taken a trip on a large homemade raft in 1965 down the same river. The book is based on the real-life raft trip down the Mississippi that the author and 15 of her classmates at Virginia's Hollins College (whose alumnae also include Annie Dillard) took in 1966.

Lee Smith provides a fascinating character study of the fictional women, all from the South, from the time they were in college in the 1960s to their lives 34 years later aboard the "Belle of Natchez" as it steams from Paducah, Ky., to New Orleans.

The author did thorough research on steamboats going down the Mississippi River, and her accounts of the days on the "Belle of Natchez" and the sights to be seen on the shores of the river ring true.

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### **Melinda says**

I would have thought that 432 pages would have provided sufficient time to develop a character or two, but this book definitely proved this aspiration wrong. After reading the summary, it appeared that this book had promise - college roommates reuniting 30+ years after embarking down the Mississippi River on a raft, but too much fell short. Even after all that time, these five women appeared just as immature, shallow and self-conscious as ever, none with whom I would ever imagine being friends. Their common connection and reason for the reunion, a tribute/memorial to their recently deceased friend, Margaret "Baby" Ballou, was the most selfish, immature of the bunch, and yet, ended up with the most promising life.

I had my great hopes that this book would turn around and show promise, and so I continued, but even to the very end, all I can say is "blech."

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## **Jan says**

While there were parts of this book that I really enjoyed, overall I would have to say that it was disappointing.

With its long chapters full of dense, dialogue-free paragraphs, I had a hard time getting into the book to start. I felt that most of the main characters were poorly developed, to the point that I often thought to myself, "Now, why would they react like that?" Additionally, some of the main characters were only marginally likable, even after you learned of the personal tragedies that had formed who they were.

Still, I found myself interested in their lives, only to be disappointed by underdeveloped story lines and much unfinished business. I guess that's pretty much what life is like, but since that's the case, I don't really need to be left hanging in my fiction reading.

The ending landed with a really heavy thud for me and was probably the biggest disappointment in the book. Unless Ms. Smith is planning a sequel, she left me hanging. I also found the short "update" chapter on the "rest of the girls" from the original trip very superfluous. They were hardly even mentioned in the rest of the book, why on earth would I care enough about them to get their updates?

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## **Delores says**

I picked this book up quite some time ago at a local book sale. It then sat on my shelf, which tends to happen. So on my journey to finally start tackling the books I own, I decided to read this one.

The story is about four college friends who reunite after many years to scatter the ashes of their fifth friend into the Mississippi River. Previously they had journeyed down the river while in college on a raft. There were actually more girls on the raft expedition but the story focuses on five of them.

Loosely based on the author's own college raft experience (note the author does state the characters are fictional), this story reflects a coming of age in college and then again later in life when the remaining women are in their 50s. For me, it made me nostalgic for my own days in college spent with my best girlfriends. It captures the essence of how even the best of friends can lose touch for trivial reasons, misplaced guilt, or sometimes because an individual simply wants to put the past behind them because of certain events and feelings they would prefer not to share, discuss, or relive.

Upon reuniting, the point of view is given by each friend. The reader learns how the character's past has shaped their future and how they each choose to hide their own insecurities, fears, and true feelings. While each friend is battling issues in their own lives or dealing with the ramifications of their own choices, they don't share it with one another, although at different times they each reflect that they could or should have reached out. The book effectively portrays how an individual can go back in time immediately when reunited with old friends; it's as if the person hasn't changed at all even though they have changed significantly. At certain points in the novel, each character feels like the person they were in college, the expectations and perceptions return unintentionally.

I appreciated that in the end, the author did not neatly tie everything up. Life is messy and complicated and so are friendships. As individuals, there are feelings, emotions, and situations that aren't shared with even the closest of friends. Perhaps because we believe it is easier to let our perceived lives be seen as the truth. Kudos to the author for portraying the nuances of real life.

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