

# Smiley novel tells story of 'western woman'

By Robert McGuire

"**T**he All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton," Jane Smiley's latest novel, is a thrilling tale set in a time brimming with inherently thrilling tales.

It's about the era when St. Louis was a boomtown, Kansas City was just a muddy road and abolitionist New Englanders were rushing west by the river boat load to make the Kansas Territories a free state, while Missourians were just as determined to make it a slave state.

Lidie Newton is a young Illinois woman traveling west with her new husband and becoming some strange new creature called a western woman. She travels west with dreams of a paradise, but finds the land lawless, wild and lacking in all innocence.

As Lidie and her husband settle in Lawrence, the political battles between New Englanders and Missourians brush closer and closer to home and finally take her husband's life. He is murdered by cowards set on driving out all abolitionists.

Lidie, a sensible prairie woman lacking in all frivolity, quietly begins to plan a sensible murder of her husband's murderers. Expected to return to a sober widowhood in Illinois, she instead escapes from the concerned attention of her friends, disguises herself as a teen-age boy, packs a pistol in her carpet bag, and sets out with grim determination into the enemy territory of Missouri.

It becomes an especially dangerous enterprise when, while hunting her husband's murderers, she is persuaded by a slave to help her escape to the north.

All of this — the setting, the adventure tale and even the language itself — will

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## Review

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sound familiar to fans of Mark Twain. And it is probably deliberate, though it is not an imitation meant to flatter.

Smiley is notorious for a very iconoclastic article published two years ago in Harper's magazine questioning the status of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" as great literature. She objects to the way its sentimentality gets in the way of any useful exploration of our country's experiences with slavery.

As fans of Smiley's most famous novel, "A Thousand Acres," will know, sentiment is not what she is after. In that book, too, she retells a familiar tale with the purpose of calling its sentiments into question, suggesting a different understanding of history.

In "Lidie Newton," the division between North and South, the motivations of each, the conduct of white expansion westward, women's roles on the prairie, the purity of the abolitionist movement and the practicality of romantic love are complicated by Lidie's story.

Some might find literature didactic when it has any purpose other than to entertain — whenever it strives for insight. But the kinds of insights offered in "Lidie Newton" remind us that literature can be useful in its disruption. It can demand reflection about our own sentiments. "Lidie Newton" is recommended for this and for its very compelling language and adventure story.

*"The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton" is published by Alfred A. Knopf; 452 pages; \$26.*