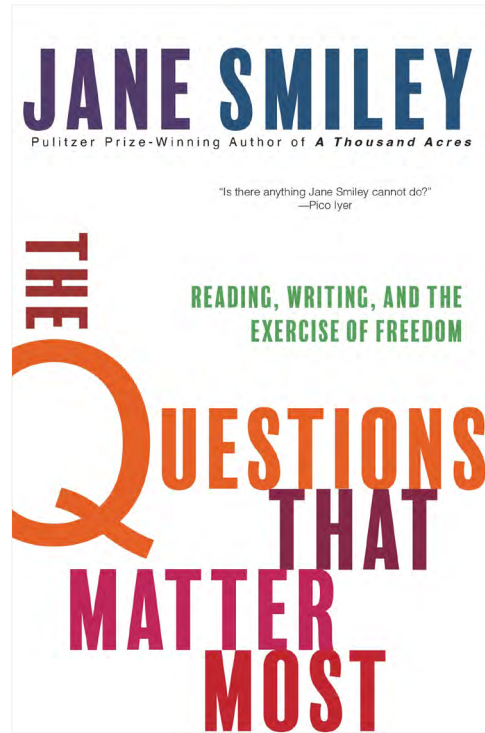


THE QUESTIONS THAT MATTER MOST TO JANE SMILEY

BY KATHERINE ARNOLDI



The Questions that Matter Most. Reading, Writing and the Exercise of Freedom by Jane Smiley who was a Fulbright Scholar to Iceland in 1976.

In the introduction to *The Questions that Matter Most: Reading, Writing and the Exercise of Freedom*, Pulitzer Prize winning author Jane Smiley tells us that, while teaching writing at University of California Riverside, she instructed her students not to judge or praise their own work or the work of others, but instead, to ask questions. Some of their questions revolved around how setting affects the main characters, which inspired the students to look more closely at their own lives. Similarly, the questions that Smiley asks in this essay collection also invite introspection, both from Smiley herself, and the reader.

The first essay, “My Absent Father,” explains how she came to have a life that is an exercise in freedom, and it opened my eyes about my own past in a way I had never considered. While I tend to label my upbringing as one of “neglect,” Smiley showed me another

“Smiley instructed her students not to judge or praise their own work or the work of others, but instead, to ask questions.”

way of looking at my early life: as one full of inquiry, exploration and freedom, not lack. Smiley looks back at her parents' distraction as a chance to think "my own thoughts and to come up with my own ideas." She writes,

A girl who is overlooked has a good chance of not learning what it is she is supposed to do...from the outside, my work and my life look daring, but I am not a daring person. I am just a person who was never taught what not to try (26).

So, it is no wonder that she soon found herself in a Marxist commune talking about ideas all night, working in factories, hitchhiking across the United States, backpacking in Europe, living in a cabin in the woods, and writing novels.

In "Iceland Made Me," first published in the *Fulbright Chronicles*, Vol. 1, Smiley attributes becoming a writer to her 1976-7 Fulbright experience. She tells us that sometime during the long, dark, winter nights, she started writing a novel about her grandparents' farm in Idaho, except that the characters would be stuck in a snowstorm in a treeless Icelandic environment. Even after coming home to Iowa, she knew her writing, whatever it would be, would have "a deep Nordic tinge, let's say a combination of wind and sky and snow and grass, of making the best of isolation and hard work, tragedy, luck and magic" (37).

In "Can Mothers Think," echoing Virginia Woolf's famous *A Room of One's Own*, Smiley names childless women writers such as George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson, but also—encouragingly to those of us who are mothers (Smiley has four children)—offers a much longer list of those who were mothers and who even wrote about mothering, including Toni Morrison, Francine Prose, Alice Walker, Louise Erdrich, Sharon Olds, Maxine Hong Kingston, Grace Paley, among others (unfortunately omitting the great Tillie Olsen and her story, "I Stand Here Ironing" in *Tell Me a Riddle*).

In "I Am your Prudent Amy," she admits she prefers Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women's* character Amy over Jo because Amy, like Smiley, benefited from neglect, has "focus, desire, determination and resistance" and is the more feminist, the more modern, able to look around at the environment she is in and forge her own way (111).

Smiley also questions the honored place of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* in our national literature, noting its failures, especially the moral failure of the characters who do not address the problems and predicament of Jim. Smiley suggests *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe as more worthy.

In her imagined rewriting of the famous finale of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Gregor escapes to a new, exciting life as a bug as he navigates the cobblestones, escaping his old family. Smiley poses the question raised in Willa Cather's *My Antonia* as simply, should I stay or should I go?

However, essays about Dickens as an editor, Nancy Mitford and George MacDonald Fraser seem to extol rather than ask questions. In “History vs. Historical Fiction,” Smiley makes a strong argument for the veracity of historical fiction, in that it allows the reader to experience what it may have been like to live in a particular time, or at least to question the truthfulness of so-called non-fiction history, citing both as constructs.

Smiley says that novels not only offer us a subjective view of life, a basic tenant of modernity, but also offer a vehicle for learning in which the reader absorbs empathy and agency. She returns to the theme of freedom in her final essay. Novels, Smiley asserts, let us see inside the mind of the writer. Reading, she maintains, is an act of connectivity, of humanity, of liberty because we have choices in what we read. Finally, reading is an exercise in questioning, exploration, creativity, close examination and the joyful love of the intellectual life.

Smiley, Jane. *The Questions that Matter Most: Reading, Writing and the Exercise of Freedom*. Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 2023. \$17.00, 256 pages.

BIOGRAPHY

Katherine Arnoldi, Ph.D., creative writing Fulbright Fellow to Paraguay (2008-9), received two New York Foundation for the Arts Awards (Fiction/Drawing), the De Jur Award, and the TransAtlantic Fiction Award. She’s the author of the graphic novel, *The Amazing True Story of a Teenage Single Mom* (Hyperion, 1998), nominated for a Will Eisner, won two American Library Association awards and was named a Top Ten Book of the Year by *Entertainment Weekly*, as well as *All Things Are Labor: Stories*, (U. Mass Press, 2007), which was a Juniper Prize winner. She is currently a lecturer at Mercy College, New York, teaching fiction and poetry. She can be contacted at Karnoldi2100@gmail.com.



ANNOUNCEMENTS

FULBRIGHT CHRONICLES: ASSISTANT EDITORS WANTED

EDITORS

As the *Fulbright Chronicles* prepares for its fourth year of publishing, we are looking to expand our editorial team to reflect the global nature and breadth of the Fulbright Program and to assist with our publishing requirements. While we invite expressions of interests from all Fulbrighters with journal editing experience, to best reflect the Fulbright's global program we especially encourage applications from Fulbrighters in Southern Africa, East Asia, Northern Europe and Central America.

Assistant Editors are part of a global team that oversees the publication of an independent, volunteer-led, peer-reviewed quarterly journal by and for Fulbrighters. Responsibilities including assisting with:

- Setting editorial policy and direction
- Soliciting articles
- Conducting the peer review process
- Copy-editing articles before publication
- Identifying topics for special issues
- Recommending distinguished Fulbrighters for the interview section
- Participating in quarterly editorial meetings
- Networking with the National Commissions and Fulbright Associations

If you are interested, please send a short letter of interest describing what you would bring to the editorial team and why you are interested to: bsvare@albany.edu

THE INTERSECTION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVES IN EDUCATION

GUEST-EDITED BY POLAT GOKTAS & JOSÉ CAETANO

The upcoming themed issue of *Fulbright Chronicles*, Volume 4, Number 1 (June, 2025), is dedicated to exploring the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and social science perspectives, with a specific focus on educational settings. Given the current prominence of AI in global discourse, insights from Fulbright alumni are particularly valuable in understanding and navigating this complex landscape. We invite submissions that investigate the educational implications of AI from various social science viewpoints, aiming to foster an informative dialogue on the subject and contributing to a better understanding of AI's impact on education.

WHY NOW?

The integration of AI into educational contexts is reshaping how we learn, teach, and manage educational environments. As AI technologies evolve, so too must our understanding of their social, ethical, and educational impacts. Fulbright alumni, with their diverse experiences and perspectives, are uniquely positioned to contribute to this critical discourse. This special issue seeks to capture and disseminate these insights, providing a platform for innovative ideas and reflective analyses on AI's role in education.

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

We invite Fulbright alumni to submit papers that explore the intersection of AI and social science perspectives in education. Submissions may include theoretical discussions, empirical research, case studies, commentaries, or review articles.

REFLECTION ON FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE

As part of your submission, please include a reflection on how your Fulbright experience has contributed to your understanding of AI and its implications for education. Specifically, consider how the knowledge and insights gained during your Fulbright fellowship have shaped your professional journey and outlook on future developments in this field.

TOPICS OF INTEREST

Submissions may explore, but are not limited to, the following areas:

- **AI in Educational Policy and Administration:** Examining the impact of AI on educational policy, governance, and administrative practices. How are AI tools being used to make decisions, and what are the implications for equity and access?
- **Ethical Considerations in AI Education:** Discussing the ethical dilemmas posed by AI in educational settings, what frameworks can guide the responsible use of AI in schools and universities?
- **AI and Teaching Practices:** Analyzing how AI is transforming teaching methodologies and teacher-student interactions. What are the benefits and challenges of integrating AI into the classroom?
- **Learning Analytics and Student Performance:** Investigating the use of AI-driven learning analytics to enhance student performance and personalize learning experiences. How effective are these tools in supporting diverse learners?
- **AI Literacy and Curriculum Development:** Exploring the integration of AI literacy into educational curricula. How can educators prepare students to navigate an AI-driven world?
- **Social and Cultural Impacts of AI in Education:** Reflecting on how AI affects social dynamics and cultural contexts within educational environments. What are the broader societal implications?
- **AI and Lifelong Learning:** Considering the role of AI in supporting lifelong learning and professional development. How can AI facilitate continuous education and skill acquisition?

TIMELINE

- *Expression of Interest:* Authors are invited to submit an expression of interest by March 31, 2025.
- *Decision on Expression of Interest:* Authors will be notified of the decision regarding their expression of interest by April 15, 2025.
- *Full Manuscript Submission:* Accepted authors must submit their final manuscripts by May 15, 2025.
- *Manuscript Revisions:* Manuscripts will be returned to authors for any necessary revisions by May 15, 2025, with a final deadline for revised manuscripts by March 31, 2025.
- *Publication:* The themed issue will be published in July 2025.