



Saving Grace

Lee Smith

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From Publishers Weekly Florida Grace Shepherd is another of Smith's spirited Southern women of humble background (Fair and Tender Ladies, etc.) who are destined to endure difficult and often tragic times. Instantly appealing by virtue of her distinctive narrative voice, which is iconoclastic and free from self-pity, Grace is the daughter of Virgil Shepherd, a self-styled minister who spreads the gospel in revival meetings by means of serpent handling and personal charisma. Even as a child, "Gracie" hates her father's insistence on constant prayer, poverty and the need to see God's benevolent "testing" in every hardship to which he subjects his family. As she matures, she realizes that her father is a compulsive womanizer who excuses his frequent lapses by claiming that God forgives him whenever he "backslides." Though his behavior eventually drives her mother to suicide, it takes longer for Grace herself to escape her father's psychic clutches. She is seduced by a half-brother at 14 and at 17 marries a melancholy 42-year-old preacher; she has two children and succumbs to an adulterous affair. Smith has great empathy for the poor, uneducated country people who yearn for a transcendent message to infuse their lives with spiritual meaning, and she demonstrates clearly how an aberrant individual like Virgil can attract fervent followers. She is less successful than usual in winning sympathy for her flawed heroine, however. Although she makes understandable the reasons for Grace's shallow personality and shows how a lifetime of sexual repression can trigger infidelity, Grace's abandonment of her children seems implausible, and her suffering never achieves a convincing poignancy. Literary Guild selection. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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