

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

DAUGHTER OF EARTH

AGNES SMEDLEY

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daughter of earth

a novel by agnes smedley

With a new introduction by Paola Mendoza
Foreword by Alice Walker

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



AGNES SMEDLEY was born on February 23, 1892, in Osgood, Missouri, as the second of five children before the family moved to Trinidad, Colorado. As an American journalist and writer, she was well-known for her semiautobiographical novel *Daughter of Earth* as well as her sympathizing with the Chinese Communist Party.

At age seventeen, Smedley took the county teacher's examination and taught in the rural schools around her home for a semester. She returned after her mother's illness to her passing in 1910. In 1911–1912, Smedley enrolled in Tempe Normal School, where she pushed her first works as editor and contributing writer to the school paper. While at Tempe, Smedley crossed paths with Thorberg and Ernest Brundin, members of the Socialist Party of America—her first exposure to socialist ideology. She married Ernest in August 1912, but divorced him subsequently in 1916, and moved to New York City a year later.

During her time in New York, Smedley became involved with Bengali Indian revolutionaries working in the US, including M. N. Roy and Sailendranath Ghose, who conspired to overthrow British rule in India. She was recruited by Roy and Ghose to help coordinate activity with Germany while they were absent, operating a front office and publishing anti-allied propaganda. In 1918 after many attempts to escape attention, Smedley was finally arrested by the US Naval Intelligence Bureau, indicted for violating the Espionage Act in New York, then later in San Francisco, and imprisoned for two months. After successfully getting her charges dismissed in 1919, Smedley moved to Germany where she continued her involvement in left wing causes and married Indian communist Virendranath Chattopadhyaya. In 1929 she published *Daughter of Earth*, separated from Chattopadhyaya, and moved to Shanghai as a correspondent for a liberal German newspaper.

Daughter of Earth was published to critical acclaim, standing out among contemporary novels for challenging gender and class norms. Detailing the life of protagonist Marie Rogers and her struggles with class poverty from birth to adulthood, relationships with men, and desire to escape marriage and motherhood, it was largely seen as an autobiographical account of Smedley's own life. Questioning conventional ideas of familyhood and working-class life, *Daughter of Earth* has since become a standard work for proletarian literature.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The Company (74): By 1880 coal mining became the largest source of energy, outperforming wood, and remained the top source until 1950 with the introduction of petroleum. Colorado hit its peak employment with the advent of the Gold Rush and railway expansion, where coal and metal mining became its biggest industries from the late 1800s to the early 2000s. Big corporate railway and mining companies bought out mining towns and the lands surrounding it: the towns were often cash-poor, remote, populated by immigrants and migrant miners, and completely owned by a single company.

Script [or scrip] (74): Any substitute for legal money, usually in a form of credit. It would be given in place of accrued wages of employees. Company script issued by the railway and mining companies in lieu of government-issued tender allowed corporations to hold monopoly over the economy because it can only be exchanged in company stores, forcing its townspeople and workers to pay high prices for resources.

Streetwalker (124): Sex worker.

I.W.W. (159): Industrial Workers of the World, established in 1905, is an international labor union that combines general unionism with industrial unionism, and holds ties to both the socialist and anarchist labor movements.

HISTORICAL EVENTS

Colorado labor wars (1903–1904): A series of labor strikes between the Western Federation of Miners and the mining company owners, who were supported by the state of Colorado. The strikes were particularly notable and controversial for the inclusion of the National Guard as enforcers of martial law to break down the coordinated groups.

Hindu-German Conspiracy (1914–1917): During World War I, Indian nationalist groups plotted with the Indian revolutionary underground, exiled nationalists in the US, the Ghadar Party, and allies in Germany for a Pan-Indian rebellion against the British Raj, with the ultimate aim of overthrowing British rule in India. Plans were formulated with extensive support by the German Foreign Office, the German consulate in San Francisco, Ottoman Turkey, and the Irish republican movement. Set to be executed in February 1915, the Ghadar Mutiny was thwarted by the British intelligence's infiltration and arrest of the Ghadar Party. Though crushed, this event was largely significant to the Indian independence movement.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Aunt Helen is one of the few women in the novel with full financial independence and autonomy. While she is strongly admired by Marie, Aunt Helen is also considered unrespectable and is even kicked out of the house by Marie's father, John, for being a prostitute. Do you think this type of attitude toward or treatment of unconventional women continues to be reflected in society today? Why or why not?
2. Throughout the novel, Marie Rogers dreads and fears intimacy and motherhood, viewing them as oppressive forces. How did her childhood and life experiences contribute to this negative perception? Do you agree with her perspective?
3. Marie's repulsion toward sex is informed by her experiences, such as listening to her parents engage in the act as a child, as well as her understanding of the uneven power dynamics and subjugation of women embedded in sexual relationships. However, her yearning for romantic love leads her to engage in sex. Are these positions mutually exclusive?
 - a. While she cannot stomach the idea of sex herself, Marie is able to support and appreciate Aunt Helen, who engages in sex as work. What does this differentiation suggest about Marie's understanding of sex?
 - b. From a contemporary perspective informed by queer theory, Marie's reluctance toward sexuality, relationships, and men might resonate with identities such as queer or asexual. Reexamining the text through this lens, how do we make sense of Marie's sexual identity?
4. Despite her aversion to men and marriage, Marie gets married not once, but twice, acknowledging her own desire for love and tenderness (143, 282). Why do you think she holds these two contradictory viewpoints? Are her actions hypocritical? Can these conflicting interests be reconciled?
5. Marie Rogers's first encounter with protest is the impediment of free speech; a noted female speaker is denied the right to hold her lecture, which leads to visible protesting by union members and working-class men and women. Marie witnesses police officers attacking one of the protesters under the pretense of self-defense. What parallels can you draw between Marie's experience and today's political climate? What has changed, or not, in the relation between the public and the police force?

6. Though a work of fiction, *Daughter of Earth* is widely believed to be autobiographical. How does Marie Rogers's life parallel that of Smedley's, and what does this novel reveal about Smedley's own struggles and psyche?
7. Although Smedley is unflinching in her portrayal of the working class and oppression against women, her progressive views are often compromised by a lack of attention to racism and its structural impact. For example, Marie's rape near the end of the book by Juan is characterized as the rape of a white woman by an Indian man, rather than as a rape of a woman by a man. Consider how these different factors interact with each other throughout the story, and how they may have affected one another's progression.
8. *Daughter of Earth* closes without a traditional conclusion: Marie ends her relationship with Anand, cold and numb to the world. What did you think about the ending? Was it a strong finish to Marie's overarching journey, or do you wish there would have been a more decisive conclusion? Why?
9. As Nancy Hoffman points out in the afterword, *Daughter of Earth* stylistically moves from mythic to novelistic to autobiographical form, roughly aligning with Rogers's development from childhood to young womanhood to adulthood. Why do you think Smedley thematically structures the novel this way? Did you enjoy this structure? Is it effective in its purpose?
10. Knowing about Smedley's later life as an active participant in the Chinese Communist Party, how do you suppose Marie would react if she were to be told she would have a similar future?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Women and Leftist Revolutions

***The Unpossessed: A Novel of the Thirties*, Tess Slesinger (1934)**

Featuring a cast of academics, activists, and society folk, this comic novel traces the ups and downs of left-wing New York intellectual life. Slesinger adds feminist insight and subtle commentary on gender relations to a male-centric class war.

***Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India*, Ania Loomba (2018)**

Loomba provides a crucial intervention into the overlooked area of leftist and feminist politics in India in this detailed study of India's revolutionary women beginning in the late 1920s. Through an examination of memoirs, novels, party documents, and interviews, Loomba sheds light on the conflicts and tensions within the female political experience.

***Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*, Erik S. McDuffie (2011)**

Through an exploration of the lives of early twentieth-century black left feminists, such as Esther Cooper Jackson and Louise Thompson Patterson, this novel highlights the pioneering radical black female activists who laid the groundwork for transnational modern black feminism.

Radical 20th Century Female Writers

***The Girl*, Meridel Le Sueur (1978)**

The Girl is a stark depiction of female life during the Depression life. Set during Prohibition, the novel chronicles the development of a small-town farm girl who moves to St. Paul, Minnesota, where she struggles with crime and her pregnancy.

***Yonnonidio: From the Thirties*, Tillie Olsen (1974)**

This novel traces the path of the Holbrook family in the late 1920s as they move from the coal mines of Wyoming to Nebraska. Their futile pursuit of a better life amid a brutal social reality is told from the perspective of Mazie, the oldest daughter.

***The Butcher's Wife*, Li Ang (1983)**

Set in a Taiwanese village in the 1930s, *The Butcher's Wife* tells the grotesque tale of a butcher and his brutal treatment of his wife, who is eventually driven to madness and kills him with his own tool—a meat cleaver. This literary sensation created an uproar in Taiwan due to its stark depiction of domestic violence and oppression.

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

But for all her perfection, victory was mine that year. The school year was not half finished before I sat in the back seat on the far outside row—and she only sat in the front seat. The back seat was the seat of honor! The child who sat there was the best in the room and needed little help or correction from the teacher. When all other children failed to answer a question the teacher would turn with confidence to the seat of honor with the word—

“Marie?”

With eyes that never left her face I arose and answered. The whole schoolroom watched and listened, waiting for a mistake. I, for all my faded dresses and stringy ugly hair, who had never seen a toothbrush or a bathtub, who had never slept between sheets or in a nightgown, stood with my hands glued to my sides and replied without one falter or one mistake! And the little white girl whose father was a doctor had to listen! Then it was that the little white girl invited me to her birthday party. My mother objected to buying bananas as a present, but after I had cried and said everyone else was taking things, she grudgingly bought three.

Triumphant moment for Marie in which she is able to transcend all other qualities that make her feel inferior to her peers

Yet Marie still wants to conform and fit in

“They are rich people,” she protested bitterly, looking at the precious bananas, “an’ there’s no use givin’ ’em any more.”

this gift is a luxury that Marie's family cannot afford
→ Contrast with the opulence that she later encounters

Marie cannot believe this is real

When I arrived at the little girl's home I saw that other children had brought presents of books, silver pieces, handkerchiefs and lovely things such as I had never seen in my life. Fairy tales mentioned them but I never thought they really existed. They were all laid out on a table covered with a cloth shot through with gold. I had to walk up before them all and place my three bananas there, covertly touching the cloth shot through with gold. Then I made my way to a chair against the wall and sat down, trying to hide my feet and wishing that I had never come.

The other little girls and boys were quite at ease,—they had been at parties before. They were not afraid to talk or laugh and their throats didn't become whispery and hoarse when anyone asked them a question. I became more and more miserable with each passing moment. In my own world I could reply and even lead, and down beyond the tracks no boy dared touch me or my

how Marie feels

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

brother George. If he did he faced me with a jimson weed as a weapon. But this was a new kind of hurt. In school I had not felt like this before the little white girl: there I had learned an invaluable lesson—that she was clean and orderly, but that I could *do* and learn things that she couldn't. Because of that and because of my teacher's protecting attitude toward me, she had been ashamed not to invite me to her party.

"Of course, if you're too busy to come, you must not feel that you ought, just because I've invited you," she had said. She was not much over ten, yet she had been well trained. I felt vaguely that something was wrong, yet I looked gratefully at her and replied:

"I'll come. I ain't got nothin' to do!"

Now here I was in a gorgeous party where I wasn't wanted. I had brought three bananas at a great sacrifice only to find that no other child would have dreamed of such a cheap present. My dress, that seemed so elegant when I left home, was shamefully shabby here. I was disturbed in my isolation by a number of mothers who called us into another room and seated us at a long table covered with a white tablecloth, marvelous cakes and fruit such as made my heart sink when I compared them with my three bananas. Only my desire to tell my mother all about it, and my desire to know everything in the world even if it hurt, kept me from slipping out of the door when no one was looking, and rushing home. I was seated next to a little boy at the table.

"What street do you live on?" he asked, trying to start a polite conversation.

"Beyond th' tracks."

He looked at me in surprise. "Beyond the tracks! Only tough kids live there!"

I stared back trying to think of something to say, but failed. He sought other avenues of conversation.

"My papa's a lawyer—what's yours?"

"Hauls bricks."

He again stared at me. That made me long to get him over beyond the tracks—he with his eye-glasses and store-made

Marie realizes she was invited out of politeness and not because she was actually wanted. Marie is confronted with factors out of her control that make her feel inferior and less powerful.

asked Marie out of politeness expecting her to decline

contrast with the language and formality of the girl

Contrast with Marie's initial excitement and self-confidence

manners are a clear distinguishing factor of class and social status

Marie's curiosity and intellect still trump her emotional discomfort → does this pattern continue throughout her development and adulthood?

they are so different that they have nothing in common to talk about

ABOUT THE FEMINIST PRESS

The Feminist Press publishes books that ignite movements and social transformation. Celebrating our legacy, we lift up insurgent and marginalized voices from around the world to build a more just future.

As an independent publisher, the Feminist Press is able to provide a personalized experience for the universities and professors that adopt our books through close attention to dealing with all aspects of utilizing books in classrooms, from providing desk and exam copies, bulk sales, programming, and more.

Feminist Press authors are available for lectures, Q&A sessions, or workshops, either in person, via video conference, or through use of social media and message boards. Our authors are committed to working with your students to enrich and broaden their understanding of the commonly read text, and of the issues and themes highlighted by the book.

