Interest in the Kansas Civil War era has been intense ever since the founding of the territory in 1854. Hundreds of articles and books, both nonfiction and fiction, and numerous Hollywood movies, often loosely based on the facts as we have come to understand them, have captured substantial audiences. And today a new cadre of younger scholars such as Nicole Etcheson are taking a fresh look at the historical record. While it is not standard practice for Kansas History to treat fiction, with two of the nation’s leading novelists coming out with major works with Kansas as their primary setting, and a new movie about William Clarke Quantrill’s raiders set for release in 1999, it seems appropriate. Thus, because fiction as well as history can cause us to ask significant questions about our heritage, we decided to break with tradition. We trust the readers of Kansas History will enjoy the following fine review essay of Cloudsplitter by Russell Banks (758 pages. New York: HarperCollins, 1998) and The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton by Jane Smiley (452 pages. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

“W e turned Kansas bloody. With a single night’s work, we Browns made the whole territory bleed,” recalls Owen Brown, the narrator of Russell Banks’s novel Cloudsplitter, of the night in May 1856 when he, his father, brothers, and brother-in-law killed five proslavery settlers along Pottawatomie Creek and helped to fuel the guerrilla warfare that quickly engulfed Kansas Territory (p. 607).
Thirty-third
Congress of the United States
First Session
BEGUN AND HELD AT THE CITY OF WASHINGTON
in the District of Columbia
on the fifth day of March, one thousand eight hundred and fifty-three.

AN ACT to organize the Territories of Nebraska and Kansas.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

That all that part of the Territory of the United States included within the following limits, with such portions thereof as are hereinbefore or hereby exempted from the operation of this act, to wit: beginning at a point on the Missouri river where the parallel of north latitude crosses the same; thence west on said parallel to the east boundary of the Territory of Texas; thence on the summit of the Rocky Mountains north and westward to the said boundary to the parallel of north latitude twenty degrees north of said parallel; thence west on said parallel to the eastern boundary of the Territory of Kansas; thence southward on said boundary to the Missouri river; thence down the main channel of said river to the point of beginning, to and the same is hereinafter called into a temporary organization by the name of the Territory of Nebraska; and when admitted as a State or Territory, or any portion of the same, shall be received into the Union with or without slavery, as their constitution may prescribe at the time of their admission: Provided, That nothing in this act contained shall be construed to inhibit the government of the United States from dividing said Territory into two or more Territories, in such manner and at such time as Congress shall deem convenient and proper, or to enable said Territory to resume its status or territory at the discretion of Congress.

The Kansas–Nebraska bill, signed May 30, 1854, established Kansas Territory, which became rife with political conflict.
Historians have long struggled to place the Kansas civil war in its proper context, usually citing it as both precursor to and cause of the national conflict that followed. Now two contemporary novelists seek inspiration in that tumultuous period of Kansas history. Russell Banks retells the life of John Brown from the perspective of the son most involved in the bloody occurrences in Kansas Territory and Harpers Ferry. Jane Smiley offers a fictional heroine who responds to historical events when she and her new husband settle in frontier Kansas.

Banks's novel is the more ambitious. Claiming for his fictionalized Browns not just the beginning of the Kansas civil war, Banks credits them with igniting the national Civil War as well. Without the Pottawatamie Massacre, the fictional Owen Brown claims, Kansas would have been a slave state and there would have been no Antietam, no Shiloh, no Gettysburg, only a peaceful parting of the sections as the South withdrew from the Union and kept its slaves. In his psychological portrait of John Brown, as seen through the eyes of third son Owen, Banks has combined old interpretations with new. In the generations after his death, the image of Old John Brown quickly cemented as that of the stern and implacable Puritan, impelled by the righteousness of his cause. John Brown replied to his interrogators after the Harpers Ferry venture that his abortive attempt to inspire slave revolt was "the greatest service man can render to God." Banks wholeheartedly endorses this image, emphasizing the elder Brown's fears for the salvation of his sons. More recent biographers seek to place Brown in the context of his time, a period when abolitionists felt frustrated by the growth of the "slave power." The theme that Brown is only crazy if slavery was sane permeates Banks's novel. Brown, alone among the white characters, believes that, as slavery was a war against the black man and woman, those black men and women—and their white allies—may justly return violence to slaveowners and their abettors. For that reason, Banks creates episodes in which the Browns fire on slave catchers in North Elba, New York; rescue imprisoned fugitives by force; and condone the escape of a slave man and woman who, it turns out, killed their master in Virginia. These episodes serve as preparation for the murders on Pottawatamie Creek, which Owen Brown describes thus: "We could slay a few men now, men who were guilty, perhaps, if only by association, and save millions of innocents later. That's how terror, in the hands of the righteous, works" (p. 607). The real Owen Brown might never have thought such a
episodes are manufactured and the facts of the Kansas civil war distorted. Yet, Banks has protected himself somewhat from the faultfinding of historians by casting his narrator as a forgetful old man (another error, in fact—Owen Brown was dead by the time Banks has him writing this account). Finally, it is a gross oversimplification to say that the Browns alone brought on a civil war, in Kansas or the nation. In making such claims, Banks ignores the entire free-state movement, to which the Browns were marginal, and all the events, such as the rise of the Republican Party and of Southern secessionists, which contributed to disunion.

Banks presents Owen Brown as a key actor in his father’s story. We simply do not know how large a role Owen Brown played in bringing on the killing. Clearly he was at his father’s side. One of the survivors of the Pottawatomie Massacre did not know the name of the old man who came to their cabin, but he did recognize Owen.

Owen Brown escaped from Harpers Ferry. However, he did not, as did his older brothers John Jr. and Jason, distance himself from his father. But was it Owen who acted, as Banks has him claim, as Iago to his father’s Othello, forcing him toward violence? Did Owen knock on the Doyle’s cabin door that May night in 1856? Was it Owen who wielded the first sword that butchered James Doyle and his sons, as Banks would have it? Perhaps Banks is reading something into John Brown’s famous claim that, although he did not commit the Pottawatomie Massacre, he “approved” of it by having Owen act. We do not know.

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7. Oates, To Purge This Land with Blood, 139.
But Banks has given us a powerful psychological portrait of growing up as John Brown’s son. The Owen Brown of this novel feels deeply both the family’s differentness and its superiority over its neighbors. The Browns adhere to a standard of racial tolerance that creates an inevitable gulf between them and other whites but does not gain them the automatic acceptance of blacks. Owen’s inability to resolve that tension, or his own latent racism, is depicted in his relationship with Lyman and Susan Epps, a black couple living in Gerrit Smith’s settlement for blacks in North Elba, New York, where the Browns have moved to provide instruction on farming. Owen feels a closeness to Lyman yet fails to treat him or Susan as equals. He fancies himself in love with Susan Epps and allows Lyman to die when he could have prevented it (another fictionalization, as the real Lyman Epps survived John Brown). After Lyman’s death, Owen fantasizes about marrying Susan and raising Lyman’s son as his own. But is this emotion sincere, or does he only seek to prove his lack of prejudice by acquiring a black family? Only when Owen leaves his father trapped at Harpers Ferry and flees into the woods does he feel liberated from these tensions: “But I was alone. Alone, and free. The entire continent lay out there. I was a man, a white man, and could go to any place on it where no one knew me, and I could become new. I could become an American without a history and with no story to tell. I believed that then and for many years to come” (p. 757). Owen, the narrator, now acknowledges that he was wrong. He will not be free until he has faced his history. Banks, the novelist, tells us that America will not be free until it confronts its own tormented history of race.


race is also a central concern of Jane Smiley’s new novel The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton. While Smiley has less interest in the historical events of the Kansas civil war, her account is almost completely free of the errors that have caused historians to quibble so much with Banks. Having quarreled a few years ago with literary critics on the relative merit of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, one expects Smiley to produce a black character of substance. She does, but only briefly. The heroine and narrator is an Illinois girl, white and remarkably plain, who marries an abolitionist from New England and settles in Lawrence, Kansas, under the auspices of the New England Emigrant Aid Company. Lidie Newton is a tomboy who can handle a gun, swim the Mississippi River, and ride a horse. As most of Lidie’s acquaintances in Kansas will be New England friends of her

new husband, Lidie serves as the voice of the West: she is ambivalent about slavery; lacks the strong moral repulsion against it possessed by her husband and his friends; and is well acquainted with white Southerners, such as her brother-in-law, who are constantly swearing, spitting, and drinking. (Smiley does better in depicting well-rounded Southern characters than does Banks, but much of the stereotypical "border ruffian" remains.)

Lidie meets her husband-to-be as he is traveling west to Kansas. Facing the burden of her support after her father's recent death, her older sisters encourage marriage to this quiet, and to them odd, easterner. Fortunately for her sisters, Lidie and Thomas Newton are attracted to each other, and the match is promptly made. Thomas is only slightly delayed in his trip westward, and Lidie now accompanies him. On route, Thomas reveals to his startled bride that among their baggage is a crate of Sharps rifles he is bringing to free-state settlers at Lawrence.

Nonetheless, the Newtons proceed on their journey and arrive safely at Lawrence with the help of a Missouri teamster, David B. Graves, who is "sound on the goose" (Missouri slang for proslavery) and so maintains himself in good standing among the border ruffians but will haul an abolitionist's freight if the money is right. He becomes Lidie's rescuer and nemesis. In one sense, Graves fulfills another stereotype of Missourians—their gallantry toward women.

Smiley depicts well the hardships of settling Kansas Territory. The Newtons start a claim, driving off some Missourians in the process, but spend much of the winter of 1855—1856 in Lawrence. Whether in town or country, Kansas proves primitive, harsh, and demanding. In one of the book's most affecting passages, the young wife on a neighboring claim dies soon after the death of her newborn baby. For a picture of how hard life could be, especially for women, on the Kansas frontier, Smiley is unsurpassed.  

Women are, indeed, a major concern of Smiley's. Each chapter begins with a quotation from Catherine Beecher's Treatise on Domestic Economy, the founding volume of home economics. Lidie Newton is presented as a rebel against the nineteenth-century's emphasis on domesticity. Her sisters despair of her not only for her lack of looks but also because she cares little for sewing, cooking, or housework. But Lidie's failures as a true woman prove to be assets on the Kansas frontier: she can ride and, most of all, she can shoot. Despite the persistent atmosphere of violence that Smiley creates, Lidie's marksmanship serves mainly to provide the Newton table with food.

Occurring in the background, as the Newtons develop their Kansas claim, are the events leading to the Kansas civil war. These are important to the plot but poorly integrated into it. The characters talk politics; the men participate in the free-state movement; Lidie is present in Lawrence for the May 1856 Missouri invasion of that town and hears of the Pottawatomie Massacre; and leading free-state figures, such as Charles and Sara Robinson and Jim Lane, are characterized more accurately by Smiley than by Banks. All of this is presented in the most pedestrian fashion, however, as if once in a while the author must update the chronology. Lidie Newton, unlike Owen Brown, is on the fringes of these events and clearly would not care about them if she were not married to an abolitionist. Not until roving border ruffians kill Lidie's husband and her horse—sometimes it is unclear which Lidie views as the greater loss—does the novel achieve any emotional power and narrative force.

With Thomas's murder, Lidie employs both her tomboy talents and western connections to move into Missouri society and search for the killers. She never finds them (the search for murderous revenge fizzles much as it does in Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning A

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Thousand Acres") but becomes the houseguest of a well-to-do Missouri planting family. Befriended by a daughter of the house and nursed back to health by the slaves, Lidie initially views these connections as enabling her to pursue her vendetta. But when these gracious Missourians (another stereotype of Southerners) do bring her into contact with the men she believes to be her husband's killers, she does not recognize them. Just when Lidie seems prepared to give up, however, she is approached by Lorna, the no-nonsense slave woman who has nursed Lidie back to health. During their courtship, Thomas Newton solicited Lidie's rascallion cousin Frank to put some money under a rock near a cave on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River. Lidie accompanied the lad on this errand, and both knew the money was for a runaway slave watching from the cave. Now we find that Lorna was that runaway, and that she has since been recaptured, punished, and restored to her owners. Lorna, recognizing Lidie, seeks her aid in another escape attempt. Lidie, viewing this as a providential opportunity to carry on her husband's work, agrees. The escape, however, is unsuccessful. While still in Missouri, the two women, posing as servant and mistress, encounter David B. Graves who, valuing slavery more than gallantry, turns them in. Lidie goes briefly to jail and Lorna, tragically, is sold South.

Like Owen Brown, Lidie Newton becomes an outsider in her own country. Upon her return to the East, she has a brief, and uncomfortable, career as an antislavery lecturer. While abolitionist principles marked the Brown family as different, Lidie's experiences in Kansas set her apart. Lidie, like Owen Brown, has had personal experience of Americans' most painful dilemma: race. Lidie is as marked by her life as an abolitionist's wife as Owen is by his as an abolitionist's son. Despite the outsider nature of their characters, Smiley, with careful attention to historical detail, and Banks, with emotionally powerful and forceful prose, remind us of the importance of Kansas Territory and the race issue to United States history. As Banks makes clear through his portrayal of Owen Brown, no American is without a history or a story to tell: we must all acknowledge the place of race in our country's past.