



## Daughter of Earth

*Agnes Smedley , Alice Walker (Adapted by) , Nancy Hoffman (Adapted by)*

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**Daughter of Earth** Agnes Smedley , Alice Walker (Adapted by) , Nancy Hoffman (Adapted by)

This gritty autobiographical novel recreates the amazing life story of an American working class woman. Revered writer and activist Agnes Smedley worked to advance the cause of human justice on three continents as a writer and political activist. Here, she relives in fictionalized form her first thirty-three years—growing up on the wrong side of the tracks; discovering double standards of class, race, and sex among East Coast intellectuals; facing false espionage charges; and maintaining her independence through two tormented marriages.

## Daughter of Earth Details

Date : Published January 1st 1993 by The Feminist Press at CUNY (first published 1929)

ISBN : 9780935312683

Author : Agnes Smedley , Alice Walker (Adapted by) , Nancy Hoffman (Adapted by)

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# From Reader Review *Daughter of Earth* for online ebook

## Alethea Bothwell says

This is an amazing book and I highly recommend it. The only reason I didn't give it 5-stars is that I save 5-stars for books I would take to a desert island, and this doesn't quite make the cut. But it is seriously worth reading. About a poor person - and a woman - with a mind of her own. I would make it required reading.

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## Jessica Haider says

"*Daughter of Earth*" is an autobiographical novel about a woman born and raised in poverty in the early 20th century. She rises above the neglect and abuse that she experienced in her childhood and she works hard to make an independent life for herself by seeking out education and work. She rejects the idea that a woman needs a man to make her life complete.

This book was named as one of "500 Great Books by Women".

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## Suzanne Kelly says

I first read this book over 40 years ago. I held on to the paperback for all these years because it was so important to me. It held up well and re-reading it allowed me to appreciate its feminist point of view. The struggles, hard choices, courage, determination and vulnerability of the main character of this semi-autobiographical book were moving and inspiring as well as haunting. I was able to let this book go and release it to be read by someone else to appreciate.

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## Sheila says

Validation for *Daughter of Earth*. (Besides my own):

<http://www.openculture.com/2013/10/fa...>

...Dos Passos, unlike most of the men, names a few women writers, including Agnes Smedley, now revealed to have been a triple agent for the Soviets, the Chinese, and Indian nationalists, "one of the most prolific female spies of the 20th century." Dos Passos' commentary on her autobiography *Daughter of Earth*—which he misremembers as *Woman of Earth*—is mostly understated: "An uneven but impressive I suppose autobiographical narrative of a young woman's life in a Western mining camp and in New York."

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## **Sarah Riley says**

*Daughter of Earth* is a can't-put-down story of American life for a woman at the turn of the Twentieth Century. Like *Grapes of Wrath*, it is both a period piece, and a tale that tells us something of humanity we grow from hearing. I thought of my grandmother's life in farming & mining communities in the developing West as Agnes recounts the years of her childhood and upbringing. This book is also a look at Women's Rights, and the beginning of what Agnes Smedley is mostly known for, her commitment to human rights and her involvement in social Revolutions. This reads as historical fiction, but is largely autobiographical. I loved it.

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## **Mara says**

Another "Protest Novels" gem. Wow. My first real introduction to Socialism. I remember reading a passage out loud and bringing myself to uncontrollable tears. Beautifully written, certainly grim, and definitely worth your time.

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## **Margaret says**

The first part of *Daughter of Earth* is the most engaging, describing her life on the American frontier in the last decade of the 19th century in evocative and often lyrical language. The narrative drags a bit when it reaches her time in New York as a university student and political activist, but this fictionalization is not as remarkable as the facts of Agnes Smedley's life. Rather tempted to read a biography of her now, since this work closes when she leaves the US to spend the majority of her life in Europe and then China. She marched with the Red Army! Remarkable woman, especially in her time.

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## **Krista says**

I don't think that I have ever read a book that I hated, then thought was the best book ever written, then thought was OK. But this was it. What was most interesting was that it is based on Smedley's life. The afterword by Paul Lauter was enlightening and helped clear up why I have never heard of Agnes Smedley before. Bottom line: still worth reading- especially for feminists.

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## **Suellen says**

Tammy encouraged me to read this. Awesome.

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## Vitani Days says

Un libro potente, di quelli che restano. Scritto in un inglese semplice, pulito, bello, "Daughter of Earth" è la storia di una vita e di una donna, e molto più di questo. Marie Rogers, di discendenza indiana e di origini povere, racconta i suoi primi trent'anni di esistenza mentre osserva il mare del Nord stendersi grigio davanti ai suoi occhi. Quello stesso mare è il fluire ininterrotto dei suoi ricordi. Ricorda la figura del padre, un uomo bello, sognatore, romantico, viaggiatore, storyteller, inconcludente, egoista e a volte violento; una figura con cui sarà in conflitto per buona parte della sua vita, un conflitto che non verrà mai interamente risolto. Una figura in diritto, dall'alto della sua maschilità, di giudicare e dominare. Ricorda la madre, donna bella ma precocemente invecchiata, che ha lavorato tutta la vita come una schiava, succube dei capricci del marito, e che sfogava la sua frustrazione proprio su di lei, la figlia ribelle; quella stessa madre le morirà tra le braccia, fiera di lei che è riuscita a diventare un'insegnante in una piccola scuola di campagna. Ricorda i fratelli, uno morto in miniera e uno quasi disperso in guerra, e le sorelle: Annie, morta di parto, e Beatrice, che ha seguito le sue orme e ha studiato. Infine la zia Helen, prostituta che si fa carico del suo mantenimento a spese del proprio corpo e di una dignità che, comunque, nessuno riuscirà a calpestare. E poi ci sono tante altre esistenze che vanno ad intrecciarsi con quella di Marie, indirizzandola e, in parte, plasmandola. Abbiamo, qui, una serie di temi: il viaggio e più in generale il movimento, il sogno, la povertà, il ruolo della cultura, la dignità della donna in quanto essere umano, la rivoluzione, la guerra, l'amore, il sesso. Ognuno di essi andrebbe esaminato a parte e lungamente. Proviamoci.

Il viaggio: questo romanzo è un movimento continuo, fisico e psichico. Marie ha ereditato dal padre la propensione al viaggio, sia esso materiale o puramente mentale (inventa storie, piccole bugie). Il padre era un uomo che viaggiava in cerca della felicità, in cerca di una vita migliore. Lo stesso farà lei, inseguirà una felicità illusoria che però sarà sempre un po' più in là, sempre un passo avanti a lei, sempre "dove lei non è". Fra treni, città, cavalli, deserti e il vento insuperabile compagno, il romanzo della vita di Marie si concluderà proprio su un nuovo viaggio che comincia.

La povertà: Marie nasce in una famiglia umile, di grandi lavoratori. Inizialmente inseriti in un ambiente di fattorie rurali, Marie e la sua famiglia se ne staccano per inseguire il sogno utopico di felicità del padre, e da lì inizia la loro discesa. Sempre più in basso, finché la madre non muore di consunzione, il padre lascia la famiglia portandosi via i fratelli, e il cuore di Marie si indurisce al punto da pensare che la vita dell'uomo ruota soltanto intorno al denaro, che solo il denaro conta, che lei vivrà per guadagnare denaro. E' una donna dura, feroce, spietata con se stessa e con il mondo, quella che emerge dalle righe. E tuttavia dotata di una sensibilità e di un ardore che celano un cuore tale da poter abbracciare l'universo. Cosa che, nel sogno, accade. Contro la povertà, contro l'ignoranza derivata da una nascita "bassa" e dal connubio "lavoro-sopravvivenza", si staglia la cultura. Una cultura simbolo non solo di innalzamento sociale, ma anche di indipendenza. Conoscere significa avere il potere di ribellarsi, ed è ciò che lei scopre, molto più avanti, grazie all'amicizia con l'indiano Sardarji. Prima ancora che per l'emancipazione della donna, infatti, Marie lotta per una rivoluzione sociale, perché gli oppressi, le caste, i poveri, coloro che "appartengono alla terra", possano in qualche modo liberarsi dalle catene ed emergere. Siano essi i poveri d'America o gli abitanti della lontana India, o le donne. A questo potentissimo elemento sociale, qualcosa in qualche modo di "staccato" dal potere del singolo, va a fraporsi "l'essere umano". In questo caso, la donna. Marie rifugge l'amore, rifugge il sentimento, poiché l'amore è debolezza. Non cerca l'amore di un uomo, ma l'amore di una comunità, di amici, di fratelli. Un amore tanto più intenso quanto più è spirituale, qualcosa con cui il sesso non ha niente a che vedere. Qualcosa che passa dalla società, dall'amicizia, dal legame che nasce dalla comunanza di qualcosa. Non vuole sposarsi, il matrimonio è catena e schiavitù della donna, eppure lo fa due volte: entrambe le volte finisce male, con lei che si prende le colpe e si sacrifica per il bene di persone che ha amato. Perché, nonostante tutto, è un essere umano e prova sentimenti profondissimi. Un odio e un amore totalizzanti, sotto la corazza che s'è creata, sentimenti che diventano lacrime e incubi, universali, che abbracciano il mondo. Lei è figlia della terra, non vuole figli naturali che la leghino ma al contempo è madre

del mondo, ha il vento come compagno. Una come lei non può avere radici, non in una società in cui una donna che ha relazioni con più uomini è "distrutta", in cui una donna è un orpello che l'uomo sfoggia, orpello che DEVE essere mantenuto poiché in questo modo l'uomo afferma la propria posizione sociale, un orpello che non può lavorare né essere indipendente. Marie, spirito vagabondo, orgoglioso, testardo e indipendente, col cuore indurito dall'amarezza e dai lutti, ha bisogno di mostrare la sua forza enorme, di mostrare che ce la può fare da sola, che di quel mondo che ama e teme ne sa quanto e più di qualsiasi uomo. Anche se la sua dovesse rivelarsi solo un'eterna fuga verso il sogno di un domani migliore, lei è orgogliosa, determinata a seguire la strada. Spezzata, si rialza e si afferma. Prostrata, riparte. Con le sue sole risorse, col suo essere donna in un mondo maschile, e col suo essere umana - e dunque qualcuno che ama, odia, soffre - con cui fare i conti. Conflitti sempre irrisolti, anche tentando di conciliarli (vedi il matrimonio con Anand, amore e ragione, amore e società, amore e politica), sempre dolorosi, sempre drammaticamente vivi eppure affrontati con un coraggio e una lucidità che lasciano impietriti.

Un romanzo violento, potentissimo come ho già detto, indimenticabile per quello che lascia. Il lettore deve raccogliere il vomito di un'anima, il fiume dell'amarezza, del dolore, della flebile speranza, della lotta spietata per la sopravvivenza dei figli della terra che poi siamo tutti noi. Una lotta che spesso si riduce a un nulla di fatto ma che, almeno, bisogna avere il coraggio di tentare. Perché questo si chiama vivere. Come la povera, meravigliosa madre che, orgogliosa della figlia diventata maestra, finalmente alza la testa e cammina fra la folla dei borghesi coi vestiti smessi e senza scarpe, le mani gonfie e nere per il troppo lavoro e un sorriso di gioia e sfida sul viso invecchiato. Come Marie che, incapace di essere felice, cerca in ogni momento l'altrove e uccide i legami, che ha paura di amare eppure lo fa nel modo totale e splendidamente inconsapevole di un'anima ferita. Un personaggio, una scrittrice, una donna che merita di entrare nella storia della letteratura. Un libro che necessita di spalle solide per essere ingoiato, sopportato, metabolizzato. Un libro indimenticabile, doloroso, che ti scarnifica, e lo stesso un'esperienza che auguro a tutti di fare. Speriamo, un giorno, in una sua traduzione italiana... e, intanto, io mi inchino ad Agnes Smedley.

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## Oh You says

How is it possible that I had missed this book, and indeed the author from my collection? I'm a 33 years old and have been interested in feminism for pretty much my entire life. I've read many classic female authors and remained open/engaged to discovering new books by female writers.

This book blew me away. My copy has the introduction in the back of the book so I read this after finishing "Daughter of Earth" only to realise much of the content is autobiographical.

I'm still in a state of shock and awe. How and why Agnes Smedley is such a mystery to UK audiences is a tragedy and something I'm hoping to address on a very small level by passing my lovely copy to as many people as I can. My mother, a retired English Literature teacher with over 30 years of teaching and reading had never heard of Smedley.

Aside from Agnes Smedley's genius as an important and significant female voice in the canon of literature as a whole this book as a work of (kinda) fiction is breathtaking. I actually want to re-read it again right now and I only finished this 2 days ago. It really is that good!

When I think about the autobiographic nature of this story it makes sense in hindsight. It would be difficult to create a character so fully rounded and unique from imagination alone. The circumstances, story arch and plot is astonishing; it might be my current slightly doomed state of mind but this book gave me so much hope. The strength presented in the heroine, the indomitable force of will is beautiful, aspirational, I could go on...

This is an essential read for anyone of any gender. Agnes Smedley deserves to be far more well known and respected.

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## Val says

This is an amazing book, but anti-Socialist rhetoric makes it easy to see why there are very few editions in print, and I'd never heard about it. It's billed as fiction, but what is clear is that it is actually autobiographical. When I was not too far into it I remarked to a friend that Smedley would get along well with Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Margaret Sanger -- then toward the end I found Margaret Sanger (unnamed) mentioned. So, yes, I was right. What I am taking away from this is that I personally believe everyone should read this because it will force a mirror in front of everyone -- now -- to ask ourselves what has changed in our culture, what is the same, what has improved, and what is worse. This is not a book I could ever sell to most of the people I know because they are too historically shallow to "get it." I guess maybe if you liked (and "got") Cider House Rules, you would "get" this book. Otherwise I fear people would just think of it as propaganda or whining. It deserves to be assigned reading, but it is something I would actually be scared to death to assign in such a conservative area for fear of the backlash. That is an interesting conflict to have rattling around in my head. Because so much of who I am to the core lives with "to hell with the Establishment" because they have rejected me and made MY life hell for so long. However, when it is "the Establishment" who decides if you get to work, well, then you think about things a little bit differently.

Reading Smedley's words, one point she raises over and over and over again is her will to be able to work for her own living, even when it is very unacceptable to do so (and there aren't a lot of career options open to her -- at some points she is even railing that she would prefer prostitution to marriage...can you see why this would not play well in a conservative crowd, especially when a lot of me agrees with her position?). There was a place -- my parents' generation -- where women had a choice. Now I sit here, scrapping through life, in the exact opposite position of Smedley -- I have no choice but to work. And while I want my life to have use and meaning, I am just as angry and frustrated for the lack of choice as she was. She wants what I have, but in the interim society's whole perspective on marriage has changed so dramatically. And what the world is telling me is that I can't have both career or family, there must be a choice between the two, and that choice is rapidly being taken away from me.

So my thoughts to Smedley are that the inverse is not better, and poverty is still a prison. "All animals are created equal. Pigs are more equal." -- that's exactly right. I know that the nasty 19th c. idea of Social Darwinism that people who are poor deserve to be poor still remains (though this is something the exploiting European colonial powers held forever).

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## Amy says

this book was incredibly heavy handed - until you figure out (if you are like me and don't read the written date, only the published date) that this book is largely autobiographical and she was born in 1890. one bad ass broad. truly inspirational.

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## Sally Edsall says

This is an interesting book because it is about a subject and time not otherwise written about (or at least known to me) much in American literature, from a woman's point of view. Lovers of Steinbeck would find

much to admire and enjoy here. It is a very ideological work. Smedley, after all, was a champion of the Chinese revolution and friend of Mao Tse-tung.

It is beautifully and evocatively written, so it does not read like a treatise, but it is a fundamentally political work - feminist and socialist. It is about STRENGTH and politics.

If you are interested in rural poverty, and fighting against the odds and limitations in early 20th century America, you will find much in this book. Fans of Maya Angelou may like this too.

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### **Velvetink says**

Agnes Smedley, (February 23, 1892 – 6 May 1950) was an American journalist and writer known for her chronicling of the Chinese revolution. The book focus is on her time in China.

She embraced and advocated various issues including women's rights, Indian independence, birth control, and China's Communist Revolution. Smedley authored eight books; she wrote articles in many periodicals such as Asia, The New Republic, Nation, Vogue, and Life. A website on Smedley states, "Influenced by her impoverished childhood Agnes Smedley was an advocate for women, children, peasants and liberation for the oppressed."

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### **Willow says**

This is fascinating, a first hand account of growing up in the mining camps and what it meant to survive. She is brutal in her honesty of life and views of women in their societal roles. After adventures and escaping marriage proposals, she is in the city working with foreign freedom fighters from India. Great peripheral perspectives of the labor movement, prison conditions, and cultural bullshit.

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### **Denni says**

First read this quite a long time ago, but it remains one of the most inspirational books I've ever read. I've given it as a present to friends I thought it would appeal to. It has lifted my spirits when I've felt that life's too tough because her life was so much tougher but she kept going, and her achievements were amazing given what she had to overcome throughout her life.

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### **Mel says**

Agnes Smedley wrote only one novel, she wrote this in the late 1920s before going to China while living in Germany. The book is described as "autobiographical" and most people seem to agree that the events in the book mirror her own life. The book tells the story of a young girl growing up very poor in America at the turn of the century. Normally I'm not a big fan of books about poor Americans, I can't stand Steinbeck, but I found I really enjoyed this one. I think part of the reason was that the characters came across as real people, they were flawed and complicated and not just there to be archetypes. The main character, Marie, was



horrified by the way women were treated in her life and community. One of the most surprising things in this book was her open discussion of having two abortions and her tremendous fear of childbirth and control by men. It was heartbreaking to read of her trying to commit suicide when she discovered that she was pregnant. It made me really appreciate how much birth control has changed the lives of women, before we really didn't have much of a choice about how to live. It was a book about struggle, a struggle to survive and a struggle to grow. I felt that Smedley's writing reflected the life journey of her main character and that the style improved as the character grew up and matured. What was interesting was her move towards helping the Indians in their struggle for independence from the British. It was interesting to see an underground movement in America for a change. The rape and subsequent imprisonment of Marie was just terribly sad and hard to believe that this was 20th century America. When reading Agnes Smedley's report of life in China during the Second World War and the civil war, I was always amazed at what she was able to endure and how strongly she was able to sympathise with the suffering around her. Having read this book I think I start to realise that there really wasn't that much of a difference between her lives. I also think I may have to give up my idea of her being a lesbian. She definitely seemed to have a few close women friends, but I find it hard to believe that she could have been as open as honest about her relationship with men, and her attitudes towards everything else, and not be able to admit any of that. But an incredible read. One I would definitely recommend to anyone interested in gender issues or women's history.

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### **Tracy says**

The book begins with Smedley's character looking out at the cold Danish sea. Such an important book, Willa Cather-Trotsky-Ghandi-Gayle Jones-Dorotea Languette-esque characters. Fictionalized autobiography of early 20th Century radicalism. So important to read, perfect, dramatic narrative of economic realities on families, nations, movements. There probably were rich people described at some point in the novel, I can't remember. I do recall how much she loved the people around her, her poor hardworking parents, dead too soon, the inspired young radicals she meet, the failures, travels - what an incredible human being, really.

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### **Anika J. says**

Irreddenably depressing.

I can handle depressing, but good Lord.

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