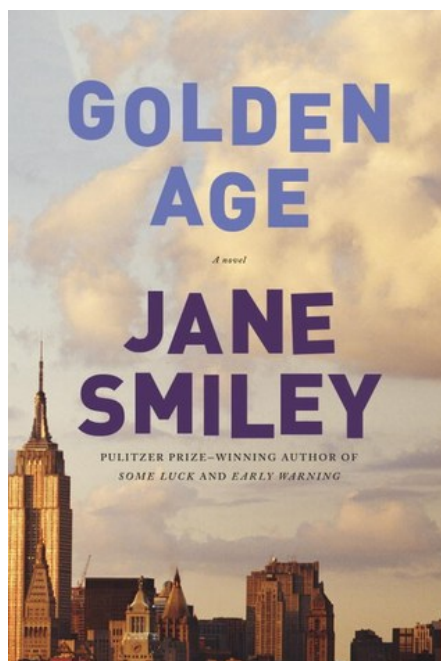




Golden Age

Jane Smiley

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From the winner of the Pulitzer Prize: the much-anticipated final volume, following *Some Luck* and *Early Warning*, of her acclaimed American trilogy—a richly absorbing new novel that brings the remarkable Langdon family into our present times and beyond

A lot can happen in one hundred years, as Jane Smiley shows to dazzling effect in her Last Hundred Years trilogy. But as *Golden Age*, its final installment, opens in 1987, the next generation of Langdons face economic, social, political—and personal—challenges unlike anything their ancestors have encountered before.

Michael and Richie, the rivalrous twin sons of World War II hero Frank, work in the high-stakes world of government and finance in Washington and New York, but they soon realize that one's fiercest enemies can be closest to home; Charlie, the charming, recently found scion, struggles with whether he wishes to make a mark on the world; and Guthrie, once poised to take over the Langdons' Iowa farm, is instead deployed to Iraq, leaving the land—ever the heart of this compelling saga—in the capable hands of his younger sister.

Determined to evade disaster, for the planet and her family, Felicity worries that the farm's once-bountiful soil may be permanently imperiled, by more than the extremes of climate change. And as they enter deeper into the twenty-first century, all the Langdon women—wives, mothers, daughters—find themselves charged with carrying their storied past into an uncertain future.

Combining intimate drama, emotional suspense, and a full command of history, *Golden Age* brings to a magnificent conclusion the century-spanning portrait of this unforgettable family—and the dynamic times in which they've loved, lived, and died: a crowning literary achievement from a beloved master of American storytelling.

Golden Age Details

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Author : Jane Smiley

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From Reader Review Golden Age for online ebook

LindaJ^ says

While I rate each of the three books in the trilogy a 4* read, I would probably give the series as a whole a 5* rating. Why? Because the trilogy is a family saga that experiences in some fashion most of the major historical events from 1920 through 2014. This is history as lived by those experiencing it.

This series demands to be read in order. It seems the publisher, not the author, insisted on breaking it into 3 volumes. Perhaps that made sense, as if the three books were put together, it would result in about a 1000-page book. And, if only one genealogical chart, impossible to hide the secret of Charlie's place in the family tree.

The family goes from a newly married young couple working to survive on a small Iowa farm located between the farms of their parents to a sprawling intergenerational clan spread across the U.S. from Iowa to New York to Washington DC to Chicago to California and inbetween. As with most families, the personalities of the members are quite varied. Among the family members and their partners, there are good parents, bad parents, successes, and failures (regardless of the parents). Walter and Rosanne Langdon had six children. One died very young, but the remaining five -- Frank, Joe, Lillian, Henry, and Claire -- survived. Henry is gay. Claire's children have no big role in the trilogy. Lillian's children fade into the background in *Golden Age*. It is the children of Frank & Andy and Joe & Jennifer, along with their parents, that carry the weight of the story told in *Golden Age*. While there is some redemption for Frank and Andy, this is a far less hopeful story than what we heard in *Some Luck* and *Early Warning* with a rather bleak future on the horizon.

The last five years (including 2015) are speculative, which is too bad, I think. I wish the author had gone from 1915 through 2014 and dealt only with historical events that actually happened. While it was interesting to see the author's take on the near future, it was an aberration from the preceding 95 years and required a difference in style that was a bit jarring.

Each of the books has had a different feel for me. The first was like a history lesson. The second was my "formative" years, spanning from growing up on a farm, going to college, starting a career, changing careers, etc. The years covered by the third do not feel as distant as those in books one and two and hence less settled in history. The return to a focus on the farm seemed strange at first, but on reflection, makes sense. The story starts with the farm so ending there is appropriate. Did I like it what happened with the farm? Absolutely not, but it fit the story arc of this final third of the trilogy.

I will miss the Langdon family. I would like to know how Emily, Chance, Leo, and Felicity get on.

Kathleen Keenan says

I won a free copy of this book from the publisher through Goodreads. Thanks, PRH and Goodreads!

I am conflicted about how to approach this novel. I'm a Jane Smiley fan and I loved the previous two books in the trilogy, *Some Luck* and *Early Warning*. This trilogy is about a farming family, the Langdons, as they expand and spread across the U.S. during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It covers the past hundred years of history and ends a few years in the future (2019). Smiley's writing is the kind that sneaks up on you. Her prose is straightforward and matter-of-fact, but every so often a line here or there will take your breath away. The characters get in your head because they're so human.

However, I was disappointed by *Golden Age*, the end of the trilogy. All along, I'd been suspending my disbelief as different members of the Langdon clan got involved in various zeitgeist-y situations that were clearly meant to represent how society changed rapidly during the twentieth century. But it kind of broke down and became just too unbelievable in this third instalment. And, I have to admit, I was left quite depressed by the ending. The trilogy is about how this family survives and thrives when they started with nothing but a small farm. There's realism, of course; the farming members of the family worry about climate and crop failure and others die, have accidents, make mistakes, and so on. But the end of *Golden Age* seemed to invoke a darkness that was not in keeping with the rest of the trilogy.

I'm being vague to avoid spoilers, but I ended the book feeling worse about humanity, not better, which is unusual after I read something by Smiley. I find that while she focuses on human nature with all its quirks and flaws, her writing is usually generous in that it tries to understand why people are the way they are. The ending of *Golden Age* presented such a pessimistic outlook on the future of humanity that I'm still surprised by it.

Amy says

The final book in the Last Hundred Years trilogy. Completely heartbreaking. I know that in real life, things are never tied up in a nice tidy bow, but the ending to these books was especially devastating. Of course as the older generations age, there are going to be deaths. However, there are some especially shocking deaths that take place and not a lot of closure for me, as the reader.

The middle of the book dragged for me somewhat, as the author delved into politics, the war on terror and the stock markets, drawing the events in wide swaths, which was sometimes difficult for me to follow. Further, these events didn't always incorporate the characters inner dialogue or motivations, which for me was the best part of these books.

There were still some moving sections to the book and the very end was particularly poignant. Overall, the series has been a great read!

Debbie says

I loved this book. I loved the entire series. Thinking about people and events evolving through time, some good, some bad, some a mixture-- and I'm talking about the people and events--certainly something to ponder. Just as I was starting to question the title of this book, Claire explained it--and I totally get it, having recently experienced a surprise party in honor of a new decade for me the same weekend as the awful terrorist attack in Paris. The *Golden Age* is personal--it is the joy experienced with family and friends and the world you make. I was curious to see how the future would be handled since the hundred years trilogy extends past the present. I have the same concerns as the author, but hope that she is totally wrong about election 2016. It will be interesting to see how this reads in a few years. Addendum to my review: I thought there was some political negativity on the author's part with the chosen ending; however now, I am saddened to realize she just might be right.

Chris Witkowski says

The third and final novel in the Last Hundred Years Trilogy, *Golden Age* treats us to the last chapter in the long, sprawling history of the Langdon family. We first met them in 1918, right after WW1, and we have come to know the family, warts and all, in intimate detail. The cast of characters is huge, requiring frequent glimpses at the genealogy chart found at the front of the book.

It is not surprising that many people die in this novel, considering we have been following them for so long. Of course they are going to grow old, of course they are going to fall victim to diseases, wars, violence, for after all, that's life. But the specter of death that looms over the novel renders it especially melancholy.

A benefit to following the family's history for such a long time allows some characters, especially loathsome in earlier novels, to redeem themselves somewhat in this one. We also get to see some get second chances, find love, or, in the case of Henry (my favorite), the eccentric, scholarly, gay, brother, experience "parenthood". His musing on the subject: "As for himself, his alternative history without Alexis would have been a drying up, a shutting down – his death just a book being closed and put back upon the shelf."

As in the previous novels, the story is set against the rich backdrop of current events, and in this one Smiley really goes to town. Her liberal sensibilities find rich subject matter in the events of the last thirty years – financial boom and then bust, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, 9/11, and the biggest one of all, climate change or "disorder" as one character, Riley, calls it. She is most brutal in the Michael/Loretta/Richie/Andy plot line, a truly chilling story.

I love how Smiley writes about the craft of farming, giving it very respectful, almost reverential treatment. One might say the farmers in the novel, first Walter, then Joe, and finally Jesse, are the most noble family members.

I was all set to give the book 5 stars until I neared the end and we went into the "future". The extreme, rapid developments of climate change did not seem realistic to me. And the resolution of the Richie/Michael relationship absolutely did not work. But those are minor quibbles, for overall I absolutely loved these books.

I heard Jane Smiley speak last spring and she said she wanted to write just one book encompassing the 100 years but she knew it would be too big and no one would ever read it, so she broke it down into three, publishing them 6 months apart. Taken in their entirety, as I think they should be, they are brilliant, masterful works of fiction.

Tess says

I loved this trilogy-- it was one of the most soulful and enjoyable reading experiences I've had in years.

There is something very rare and special about following a group of characters-- a family-- at such a slow pace over such a long period of time. To experience so many characters (from their own perspective) being born and living a full life and then passing away makes you feel like you are one with them; there's nothing else like it.

Smiley also has a way with language that every once in a while just takes your breath away. That happened slightly less often in *Golden Age* than it did with *Some Luck* and *Early Warning*, but when it did, it had the same soul-stirring effect.

My reasons for giving this only 4 stars are similar to what other people have noted. A lot of the characters Smiley chose to focus on in Golden Age were either unlikable, not very interesting, or in the case of at least two, not really capable of growth or change, and that was disappointing.

I will say that one character who I never expected to outlive everyone did and with such flair, it ALMOST made up for it (as did the quieter, late-in-life shifts of two other characters)-- but in the end, those positive developments made me sad for what seemed like missed opportunities with possibly more engaging characters.

Some of the more "villainous" aspects, whether they were characters or modern-day events, were also colored a little too sharply. It made Smiley seem more like someone with an agenda than an omnipotent narrator/guide. Of course that is her prerogative, and more power to her, but her personal feelings weren't such a force in the first two books, and I felt like it hurt the narrative.

Overall, though, an almost-perfect trilogy and one of my all-time favorite reading experiences. I remain in awe of what Jane Smiley has done here.

Dan says

(This review contains spoilers out of spite).

This novel is a huge disappointment. I'm a big cheerleader for the first two books. Smiley should have stopped with the second, which ends with bastard Charlie uniting with his lost birth family. The third book starts out strong with a family reunion, and it was fun seeing the whole gang back together. Again, Charlie was the catalyst.

But it soon becomes clear that Smiley has run out of things to say. She has a couple of hobby horses – climate change and actual horses. Both are stultifying boring. The climate change hobby horse is ironic in the sense that her poor planning of the novel resulted in a desertification of her third novel. The only Gen X'er is a bastard. (Full disclosure – I'm a Gen X'er). His wife is a shrill environmentalist who says environmental things and little else. Smiley spent all her time on the Baby Boomers in the second novel but didn't build up any Gen X'ers to carry into the third book.

There's a lot about horses because Smiley is bored with the book but will always find time to write about horses. There's a big setup to in 2001 so that Charlie dies in one of the 9-11 planes. It's supposed to be poignant that just like Tim died in Viet Nam, his son dies in 9-11, both progeny of Arthur the CIA agent. It was poignant when Tim died. When Charlie dies, it just seems contrived and repetitive.

I hated Charlie, but boy I sure missed him from 2002 onwards. I didn't like him, but Smiley sure did. He was the energy driving the book forward. It was at this point that I realized that the whole point of Charlie was to say how super-duper awesome the Baby Boomers are. The whole trilogy is about the baby boomers – their parents, then the boomers themselves. This isn't necessarily bad, up to a point.

This novel becomes absolutely infuriating when one of the few Gen X'ers, an artist, has a show devoted to her awesome baby boomer aunts and uncles. It's a series of photographs taken by private detectives she hired to spy on them. ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME???? This is the equivalent of having the character wake up and realize that the hole novel was a dream. It also highlights the Baby Boomer Generation's obsession with itself. Yes, Boomers, we Gen X'ers are completely fascinated by you and no price is too high to document your every move. Is there any doubt that the Boomers are the most narcissistic generation who

has ever lived? What's a few millennial selfies compared to a 1,400 page trilogy?

As the years go by, characters die off, but it's clear Smiley doesn't really care and just wants to finish the novel. The twins subplot could have been a good novel, but in the year-by-year format it just doesn't work.

This is a novel that shows the evils of writing by post-it notes. I can't remember if in her recent Paris Review interview if Smiley said she used post-it notes to track all the subplots, but she did talk about having it all mapped out. Bad idea. I know this is against conventional wisdom. Writer's love to talk about implementing post-it notes and spreadsheets, and all sorts of business tools. I think they're just envious of people who work in structured jobs.

But novels are artistic endeavors. And if you're busy looking at your post-it notes, you're too busy to actually listen to your novel. After 100 pages of this novel, Smiley should have stepped back and taken a good hard listen to what her novel was saying. Because it was saying in all caps THIS IS DOG SHIT. She could have stopped at two very fine novels and called it a day. But no, she had a wall full of post-it notes detailing who each character falls in love with, how each character dies. Post-it notes give the appearance of structure, but what they don't tell you is that your story is dog shit. Structure can always be crafted during edits. Art can never come from post-it notes.

Matthew says

This will be a review of the last book as well as the series as a whole.

I enjoyed the 100 year journey with the Langdons, however . . . this story has almost no positive. War, early death, disease, alcoholism, financial crisis, adultery, divorce, murder, environmental disaster etc. etc. etc. are all found heavily throughout this series. While these are all facts of life, I can confidently say (and I even doubt that others who have read this would disagree) that there is almost no hope at all in this story. And, considering this is a 1200 page (or so) series, that is a lot of time spent in misery. With all the different characters, you would think that at least one person would have had a good life!

So, if you are looking for something uplifting, go no further! If you really want to see 100 years of misery, pain, suffering, deceit, regret - then this is the series for you.

Renee Gimelli says

Worth every page and thank goodness for the family tree in the front, because I used it many a time.

Rebecca Foster says

Alas, the final installment of the trilogy was my least favorite. There are a few reasons for this. One is simply that I didn't like the third- and fourth-generation characters as much. Another is that, with such a large family tree, you get more lists of names and catch-up sessions. The intrusion of history is also more overt. I noted this in the 2011 chapter, especially, which mentions the Japanese earthquake, Utøya and the Occupy movement. One character dies on 9/11; another gets a flesh-eating bacteria. One is struck by lightning; another dies in a hit and run. Not only are several of the deaths unrealistic, but, true to the winding-down

spirit, there are simply a lot of them.

As people disperse and the second generation starts to die off, the bonds between the family members weaken. The Iowa farm diminishes in real-life and symbolic importance compared to the action on the coasts: California, New York and Washington, where Richie is a congressman. I might actually have preferred if Smiley had imagined an alternative history for the 2000s and 2010s. (Of course, that would have broken the mold she made for herself.) For me, it all felt too close. I had a sense of her picking easy targets: "I would like to thank the members of the U.S. Congress for being so easy to satirize," she writes in her acknowledgments. There's also too much horse material – a frequent indulgence for Smiley.

The last five or so chapters were speculative at the time Smiley was writing, and some of her predictions already seem a little silly, like violent protests against a Harper government in Vancouver in 2016. However, her environmental worries are right on, and her words about the 2012 presidential election seem prescient in relation to this year's race: a character advises his family to vote Democrat "as a protest against the Republican Party for offering a roster of candidates that went from bad to worse to worst ever."

Thoughts on the trilogy as a whole:

Ultimately, my favorite overall character was Andy, who reinvented herself as a young woman and does so again as a widow, turning into a computer and investment whiz. Frank was an early favorite in *Some Luck*, where he reminded me a lot of *Mad Men*'s Don Draper, but I grew less enamored with him over the years. Henry was perhaps my second favorite in the previous two books, but he rather fades into the background in the final book.

My advice to anyone wondering whether they should read this trilogy would be to start with *Some Luck* and, if you really like it, proceed to *Early Warning* (both of which I have also reviewed). *Golden Age* is largely unnecessary and can be reserved for die-hard Smiley fans or series completists.

Further reading: Literary Hub article, "Why Wasn't Great American Novelist Jane Smiley on the Cover of a Magazine?"

Originally published at my blog, Bookish Beck.

Beth says

I was surprised not to enjoy this one more. I guess I wasn't as invested in the new family members as I was in some of the originals (who obviously are starting to be few and far between at this point in the story). Smiley extends the story into the future and I actually found it distracting to figure out what what was going on in her future world politically and environmentally, etc.

Mostly I think was just unsatisfied with the way several of the story lines ended. Not happy endings and they didn't feel true to the characters to me. I was particularly disappointed with how she wrapped up the farm storyline. It didn't feel plausible or probable or likely that a family with the resources that this family had wouldn't have been able to sort it out. Maybe I'm just a sentimental farmer. Who knows.

Still, a must read if you read the first two and portions of it were very rewarding.

Alexis says

Jane Smiley almost hits it out of the park with this one. As a whole, this trilogy has been an exemplar of the power of realistic fiction--a saga of a family and its branches. It's well written and observed without suffering from the self-consciously clever MFA workshop overwriting that seems to be overwhelming younger literary fiction writers. (Irony, considering Smiley's own pedigree.)

There are two things that make this last novel just short of a five star book. As the expanding family trees on the endpapers show, the Langdons have become quite the clan by the end. This provides a kaleidoscopic cast of characters. Smiley wisely chooses to ignore some almost completely, but she still has some difficulty in maintaining focus and keeping threads tied. There were incidents alluded to and not explained (my personal curiosity was Jonah, though in the end, the ambiguity felt calculated rather than an accident of forgetting), and the balancing act doesn't quite work smoothly.

The larger flaw comes in the final years of the book. Smiley chooses to extend the saga till 2019, which gives the final segments a speculative fiction quality that doesn't meld smoothly with the sharp realism of earlier chapters. The politics are too obvious, and too well hinted at, from the anti-GMO and Monsanto segments a few years earlier. The speculative aspect is amped up by an accelerated timeline for climate change that has Iowa as a dust bowl only 4 years from now. Political background forms an important component of the trilogy, increasing over the course of the books, but the jump lacks ease, and takes focus away from the characters as they become pawns in a wider political scheme. The progress makes thematic sense, but isn't quite pulled off.

Over the course of 1000+ pages, I've come to care about the Langdons; their farm; their tragedies large and small. Smiley has tried to write her own great saga, the tale of how one family's great success also becomes their downfall. She's almost succeeded.

Justin Neville says

OK. So I finally finished this trilogy and am, overall, glad that I finished what I started. But was it great? No.

The first book, where we were introduced to what was then a family unit of a size we could get to know, was pretty good (and made for an excellent book group discussion). I then decided to continue with the second book and now this final book. Each book was more disappointing than the one before.

Yes, it's inevitable with a family saga that the cast of characters will grow as time passes and the generations stack up. But I've read plenty of family saga series and managed to keep better track of who was who, who was related to who - and actually cared. This time round, not so much.

Yes, there's a family tree at the beginning of the book. But that's such a faff when reading on Kindle (and it was tiny and hard to read without zooming in). Besides, you shouldn't need it unless you're really stuck.

It didn't help that there was one couple called Janet and Jared and another called Jesse and Jen. (I think Janet and Jesse were first cousins but don't check.) There was also a Tina and a Tia. (I think they were first cousins once removed, but again don't quote me.)

For much of the book, I just didn't care what happened to any of the characters due to the way they were

written - partly, in some cases, because they were mentioned so rarely given that there were so many to keep up with as we progressed through each year.

Thankfully, every now and then, just when I was losing interest and speed-reading to get through it, something would pull me in - mostly related to the older characters that have been with us from book 1 (Henry, Andy etc.).

But two things in particular nettled me.

Firstly, how every other character's death involved some major ostensibly shocking development. Yes, some of the older characters died slowly of natural causes, but most of the rest died suddenly, tragically, over-dramatically, but even then, it mostly fell flat. When one character kills his sibling by (deliberately?) running him over, it should shock but, for some reason, it didn't. And not because it was consistent with his character; it wasn't.

Secondly, as the book heads into the current century, and the current decade in particular (in fact, ending in the future, in 2019), the plot lifts beyond the mundane sphere of family life and enters the world of geo-/agro-/econo-political current affairs. It seems as if everything the characters think or do or say (especially among the younger adults) is all about the world at large and their involvement in it. Sure, our lives are affected by the bigger picture, but most of the time we are concerned with mundanities and our personal relationships and challenges - and this had been the focus of much of this family saga until this book. What's worse - suddenly in the 2015-2019 period, roughly - climate change seems to suddenly speed up and the US (and, presumably, the globe) suffers major water shortages with tragic widespread consequences. Life starts to become unrecognisably different.

What's Smiley trying to say? Why does a gentle family saga suddenly turn into a would-be Atwood novel right at the very end?

Bizarre.

Jan says

Two words describe Jane Smiley and her Last Hundred Years trilogy: sheer genius. I wavered after reading the first two books; I liked them immensely but wasn't sure I could handle umpteen more Langdons over another 33-year period. I was wrong; "Golden Age" convinced me that Smiley's effort was brilliant.

The Langdons, in many ways Every Family, are impressively portrayed in thoughts and deeds, all touching something in us, whether admiration or aversion, connection or distance. The most familiar characters are of course those in the second generation, as they are now appearing for the third time. Some who were not very likeable in previous books soften as they age, which is gratifying, but clearly this is not a warm and fuzzy conclusion to the saga. A few of their children carry that unlikeability streak forward, and the next generation is faced with the many somber challenges of the late 20th and early 21st centuries -- climate change, wars, terrorism, financial crises.

By writing this epic Smiley has chosen breadth over depth. Yet despite the century of people and events, in brief descriptions she is able to bring both to life through her incredible talent with words, her insight into human nature, and the astonishing amount of research that adds remarkable and realistic detail to the worlds of her characters.

As many reviewers have noted, the world view in the last (and speculative) chapters, 2016-2019, is quite bleak with apocalyptic overtones. In some ways it seemed more of a wake-up call from the author and less a natural continuation of the Langdon story in which we had invested so much. It's hard to be left with a dusty

taste in one's mouth.

But this is not a one-note story, and I can't forget the joy I felt while reading these books, the utter awe I felt over and over for Smiley's gifts. Five big stars.

Jaylia3 says

Golden Age is the third and final book in Jane Smiley's Last Hundred Years: A Family Saga trilogy, which began with *Some Luck*. The Langdon family has spread far and wide since the first chapter of *Some Luck* opened in 1920, but both books start in the same place--the farm fields of Iowa. The story has now reached 1987, but by the end of the book *Golden Age* transports readers into the future, through to 2019, to complete the 100 years promised in the series name.

Since family members are living all over the country, the narrative moves around, spending time in California, Chicago, New York, Washington DC, and of course Iowa. Langdon family occupations and obsessions now include politics, wall street wheeling and dealing, linguistics, literature, horses, rodeo, climate change, and (of course, again) farming, so the story delves into all those areas. Among the characters are a former cult member, a college professor, an artist, a congressman, and the current crop of farmers. It makes for a fascinating mix of perspectives.

Like its two predecessors, *Golden Age* has a chapter for each of the years that it covers. The family tree at the front of the book has gotten a lot fuller, and I had to refer to it frequently in earlier chapters, but that became less necessary as the book went on, both because Smiley doesn't focus on every Langdon descendant, and because she has a way of depicting her characters so they make an impression that sticks.

In this book I really enjoyed re-living history I can remember (and some I had forgotten) through the lives of several generations of Langdons--Smiley does a good job capturing the mood of the times she writes about. Taking the series as a whole, it was very interesting to see the wider views that a one hundred year story allows for, including all the changes farming has gone through since the 1920's. Though these books don't have traditional plot arcs there's still a lot going on, and even when Smiley is just relating quotidian events in the characters lives, or their musings about the world around them, the story is somehow completely compelling.

Alice says

I breezed through the first two books of the trilogy enjoying them as a wonderfully written family saga. Because each chapter takes place in a year, we see how major and not so major historical events touch various characters - sometimes with a major impact, sometimes only glancingly. Much the way events in the latter world effect us. At times the books are a trifle tedious, at other times they soar.

The final book *The Golden Age* is more problematic. It's strength lies in the detailing of the 'ladder of years', the passing away of the generations we have been involved with in the first two books. Its weakness lies in Smiley's attempt to educate us in the effects of climate change and agribusiness on farming. The moisture in the soil was measured too many times for me. I also don't think the distopian turn the novel takes by going beyond 2015 works.

I have a major discomfort with the trilogy as a whole. Yes, it focuses on the Midwest and on an Iowa farm family, but even so, where are people of color? Surely even people from Iowa have met more than one? Where, too, is the Civil Rights movement?

Lori L (She Treads Softly) says

Spanning five generations of the Langdon family and 100 years, *Golden Age* by Jane Smiley is the final book in the trilogy that began with *Some Luck* and *Early Warning*.

Golden Age opens in 1987 and goes into the future, 2019 for the 100 years. The previous two books in the trilogy covered 1920-1952 and 1953-1986. It must be made clear to anyone wanting to read this final book in the series that you really have to read the previous two novels first. What that means, in all honesty, is that you must be willing to invest a large chunk of reading time to meeting and following Smiley's Iowa family from start to (rather bleak) ending. You cannot just jump into this series at the end.

There is a family tree at the beginning of each book that you will want to bookmark and refer to in this final volume until you get all the characters firmly set in your mind. Smiley does an excellent job with character development, so you will know who is who, but there are many characters so until you know them (or have reacquainted yourself with them) the family tree can be quite helpful.

All of the books follow the Langdons year by year. Each chapter is a new year. Smiley pulls in historical figures and events from the year. The Langdons must now wrestle with new economic, social, and political experiences, as well as personal struggles. The extended Langdon family is now spread across the country, from the family homestead in Iowa to California. They are in Washington D.C., New York City, and Chicago. The pursuits, interests, and occupations of the Langdon clan are far-reaching and cover a wide variety. Not all of the Langdons are portrayed in a positive light as protagonists. She has her antagonists.

This isn't necessarily bad because her families feel real. They have struggles and rivalries. The relationships are full of disagreements and repressed emotions. As with any group of people, related or not, they all have their own beliefs and opinions and differing views and values can always instigate conflict.

Smiley's political views are clearly a part of this final installment, so if you have strong conservative opinions or no firm convictions concerning Monsanto's genetically altered seeds, then this novel might feel too political for you. You will know what family members espouse beliefs and causes that with which she agrees. The characters whose beliefs she disagrees with are villains or portrayed as incompetent.

I'm going to highly recommend the series as a whole. The biggest drawback to the trilogy is the sheer length of it and the necessity to start at the beginning in order to follow all three novels.

Disclosure: My Kindle edition was courtesy of Knopf Doubleday for review purposes.

Laura says

I'm not sure this book was a 5-star book on its own terms, but the 5 stars come from how much I loved this

series and how sad I am that it is over. This is the third and final installment of Jane Smiley's 100 Years Saga and deals primarily with the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Walter and Rosanna Langdon, the young couple at the beginning of book 1. As this family tree mushrooms outwards, the intimacy of the first installment is lost, but the sadness I felt about that – and confusion about how difficult it is to remember where everyone is, when we last heard from individual family members, what happened to less closely connected cousins – is purposeful, I'd guess. It mimics how families actually function. I have talked before about how personal these books feel, the many parallels to my own family history, so it was strange to get to the point in the narrative where "I" appear. Some of the historical references seemed a little clunkier in the contemporary, but maybe that's just because I knew them better? The book ends in 2019, and by my notes she stopped updating in 2014. Her vision for the next five years is brutal and left me pretty devastated. As the people die, the series returns to the land where it started, and climate change becomes central. I think I had discounted how much ecological work Smiley was doing all along. It was nice to see, at least, that the first future event she projects is incumbent upon Stephen Harper still being PM of Canada. Thank goodness Trudeau was elected; according to Back to the Future logic, with that one changed detail, I can throw out her entire vision! Phew, we're all going to be ok, guys. But seriously, these books really got to me and the conclusion was wonderful. For the first time, I have considered writing to an author to thank her. I can't recommend this series enough.

Susan Liston says

I really liked the first book in this trilogy, which begins on an Iowa farm in the 1920s. The second book, which begins in the 50s and runs through the late 80s was far less interesting to me. It seemed that the focus switched from the characters themselves, to current events featuring them. One joins a cult, one goes to Vietnam, one is gay and deals with AIDS...cliched and a bit Forrest Gump-y. But I wanted to give it one last chance, and unfortunately the third book is worse. The characters-- who now seemingly number about a zillion and who I could not keep straight without constantly referring to the family tree at the front-- again took a backseat to events of the day. Each chapter covers a single year, and sometimes even the "featured" character barely shows up while we read Wikipedia page-like essays about Monsanto and GMOS and Iraq and the difference between the Shias and the Sunnis and global warming and the financial crisis and Wall Street, and so on and so on, LOTS of what is obviously the author's personal political opinions, which I agree with..preachin' to the choir, here, honey, but enough already, this is a novel, not an op/ed in the Huffington Post. And speaking of cliché, I held my breath when we came to 2001, surely, SURELY no character dies on 9/11...oops, what are the chances, but yes they do! (not a spoiler, you KNEW that would happen, and there are 45 characters to choose from) Once in awhile I would find I was engrossed with this book rather than yelling at it, and that was always the rare times when it was just about the people and not about the news. Jane Smiley is a good writer and I am sad that she went the way she did with the last 2/3rds of the saga.

Ginny says

I had paused in my reading of this third novel in the trilogy, and going back to it I realized why. In 2006, we had to follow one of the second cousins into Iraq. Not a fun place to be. I finally got up the courage to pick it up again, and am very glad I did. Just as amazing, albeit in a different way, as the first two in this classic trilogy. The prose has such a wonderful, rhythm, deceptively simple. Was it a Golden Age? As Claire points out,

"...all golden ages were discovered within. No one would ever know that her father, Carl, the endless Iowa horizon, a pan of shortbread emerging from the oven, and her grandchildren laughing in the next room had indeed made her life a golden age."

