

Ten Days in the Hills by Jane Smiley.
Faber and Faber 2007.

This is a novel that contains a multiplicity of threads and themes that individual readers will emphasise depending on their interests or prejudices.

Set in March 2003 in California, and ranging, as the title suggests, over a period of ten days, it focuses on a small group of interconnected individuals at the heart of which is Max, an indolent film director and Elena, his partner. Around them gather assorted children, colleagues and friends, and the novel is concerned with their inter-actions with each other as a group and as individuals.

Jane Smiley has a pace and verve to her writing, as well as a real knack for eroticism, that is admirable, and she also uses the story as a vehicle for a marvellous hindsight polemic on the insanity of Bush's invasion of Iraq; other targets are the OTT materialism of those in the movie industry and the pretensions of self-styled gurus.

This is a book rich in characters but some stand out: Zoe, Max's stunning ex-wife and her mother Delphine, Max's friend Stoney Whipple and Isabel, Max and Zoe's only child. Ultimately this is a wonderful tale of human relations in all their complexity and the way in which outside events can cast a shadow over even the most gilded lives.

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