

# Prescription:

**Complaint:** No enjoyment in reading, no appreciation of literary works

**Prescription:** Read purposeful and interesting works to find the enjoyment of reading and appreciate this art form. Drug prescribed: *Strange Fruit*

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## Medication information, side effects, and purpose:

Lillian Smith was a complex, unique, exquisite person, bearing strange fruit. Smith was planted and rooted ahead of her time. She was built of fierce determination, incomparable strength, and fearlessness. Headstrong, she branched into the territory most were too afraid to approach. And the fruit she bore was sour to taste and rare among her neighbors, but it was valuable and real. Lillian Smith deserves to be studied in her complexity and quality not only because her radical beliefs were groundbreaking, but because they were not easy to pursue and she never gave up.

In her early life, Smith grew up in a typical southern environment, but quickly saw its flaws. Smith was born in Jasper, Florida in 1897, but as her family went broke, they found themselves relocating. She spent most of her childhood in their cottage in rural Rabun County, Georgia. Smith laid her roots here, on Screamer Mountain, as her family built a camp for young girls. She continued to grow as she was educated at Piedmont College. She had a deep love for music and briefly pursued it as she found herself at the Peabody Conservatory and a Methodist missionary school in China teaching music (Clayton). Smith found herself planted in a time of racism, gender inequality, and segregation, yet she did not let the toxic nutrients of her surroundings disrupt her growth. Instead, she used them to fuel her purpose.



With her roots wide and strong, she began to grow upward to a greater purpose. Her parents grew ill and passed the responsibilities of the girl's camp to Smith. This is where Smith first separated herself from the rest of the crop; she transformed the camp into a place for discussion of liberal ideas (Clayton). Smith committed her life to living out her beliefs, publicly declaring them, and being a forum for discriminated minorities. Smith spent most of her life with her partner, Paula Snelling, who together openly shared their controversial and unaccepted relationship (Bass). Despite the scrutiny and judgement of their same-sex relationship, they continued to publicly love each other. As a discriminated minority herself, she had a unique perspective in that time. It is believed her experience as a minority fueled a lot of her fire to fight for minority rights. Unlike most of her time, she was passionate about civil rights and devoted her writing and life to

discussing it. She and Snelling started a magazine, holding many different titles over the years, that was a place to publish their beliefs about civil rights and give the black population a place to discuss their views (Clayton). The magazine had great success over the years, but with time Smith decided to stop writing the magazine and devote her time to other writing. It was time for her to branch out and blossom her legacy.

Smith left her legacy in her famous works, unpopular opinion, and controversial honesty. She was unique because her writing was “the first time that a southern white has not only had the courage to share with us secrets of an anguished soul but has also by means of poetic imagination and style” (Kimmelman). Smith shattered all standards when she published her book *Strange Fruit*, which was a story of a forbidden interracial love. *Strange Fruit* was actually originally named *Jordan is so Chilly*, but after the Billie Holiday song “Strange Fruit” about lynched bodies in the trees released, Smith changed the title of her book. Smith said *Strange Fruit* was the perfect title for the book “not because it symbolized a lynching, but because it symbolized a people. We, the people, white and colored, are the strange fruit for which our culture has produced” (Smith). Smith faced great push back from this novel as it was banned in many areas of the country due to the fact that content like this had never been released before and people saw it as obscene and inappropriate. She was not surprised by the reaction it received because she said people were “Shocked at realizing that a way of life, in which we all participate, is so destructive” (Smith). Smith is best known for *Strange Fruit* because of the scrutiny and publicity she received for it, but she did publish many more works, all denouncing segregation. Lillian Smith is also well known for her follow-up book to *Strange Fruit*; it was an autobiography called *Killers of the Dream*. It too received negative feedback because of its content and honesty. Smith continued her denouncement of segregation and racial issues publishing more books like *The Journey, Now Is the Time, One Hour, Memory of a Large Christmas, Our Faces, Our Words* (Amazon).

Unfortunately, Smith’s life was cut short by cancer and she passed away in 1966. However, she did not just wither away; her legacy and memory are still continuing today. People today admire her for her fierceness, strength, and perseverance. In spring 2019, a documentary film of her life and contributions will be released called “Breaking the Silence” (Jacobs, Hal, and Jacobs, Henry). Though she may not have been as appreciated in her time, people now have begun to appreciate the position she took and her strength to pursue them. There are many current day awards, honors, and titles inspired by Lillian Smith and her work that prove that her legacy continues including, but not limited to, The Lillian Smith Book award that honors authors of civil rights, the strangefruit fashion collection for “women who buck the trends and dare to be different,” and an opera that is based on the book *Strange Fruit* (Bass).

Lillian Smith spent a lifetime growing. She bloomed, bringing the world beautiful, intricate, and one-of-a-kind works of art. Her works transformed the standard. She broke down barriers fearlessly to accomplish her dream of equality. Though she may not have seen her dreams come true in her lifetime, she went down fighting and never gave up. She was underappreciated, unaccepted, and made an outcast in her time, but looking back she is a woman of importance.

She was unlike other woman in her time; she had different thoughts, opinions, and acted upon them differently than others. She could be considered strange, however, looking back she was a beautiful thing in the midst of thorns. She may not have fit in, but that did not intimidate or stop her. She loved standing up for the “strange” because it meant that one day the outcasts could be considered normal.

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