



Kids prove better at adapting than parents when they run away from home

BY JAMES RENOVITCH

Steplings

by C.W. Smith

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It's said that kids adapt to change better than adults. What's usually not mentioned is that predicting the nature of that adaptation is nigh impossible. In *Steplings*, the characters struggle with the usual destructive forces within a family: divorce, death, alcoholism, poor communication, and the stupidity that accompanies youth. C.W. Smith, who teaches at Southern Methodist University, tosses in a crisis and explores how the cards play out for the older and younger members of a Dallas family.

Burl and Lily, widowed and divorced, respectively, find comfort in the stability of their new marriage. That stability does not extend to the child each brought to the marriage. High school dropout Jason hit the skids after the death of his mother, putting Burl over his head in the choppy waters of parenting. The aggressive nature of Jason's anger contrasts sharply with the quiet resentment of Emily, Lily's 11-year-old daughter. It only takes a letter from Jason's sweetheart breaking off their relationship to ignite the powder keg Burl and Lily have unwittingly created by coming together.

The book splits its time between the kids' exploits on the road, as they escape what to them is a situation beyond salvage, and Lily and Burl's desperation in the absence of their children. The juxtaposition of these two couples provides the engaging core of the novel. Smith positions the kids' quick adaptation to their ever-changing situation in stark contrast to Burl's and Lily's opposing and unbending plans for retrieving the runaways. While Emily and Jason manage to create a tenuous friendship, their parents' relationship buckles and cracks from the pressure. And despite parental niceties insisting that love is equal for biological kids and stepchildren, when push comes to shove (and it does here), parents choose their offspring over everything and everyone else.

Even though these kinds of relationship dynamics have been mined many times before, Smith's story rings true and never feels stale. A dash of international politics spices up the personal politics of *Steplings* in a way that isn't forced or incongruent. The only misstep is a brief glimpse into the life of Jason's girlfriend that reads like a long parenthetical to the real story – a story of bonds between siblings and spouses, parents and children, and the fallout when they pull in different directions.

C.W. Smith will appear at the Texas Book Festival, which runs Oct. 22-23.