



C.W. Smith takes to Texas highways and social media byways to tout his new novel, *Steplings*

BY TARRA GAINES

These are interesting times for literary writers, interesting as in the supposedly ancient curse, “May you live in interesting times.” Bookstores are closing. University and small publishing houses are publishing less fiction while larger houses tend to be unwilling to take risks on new or even established writers unless they come with their own following.

Yet, what makes these times really interesting is that once a writer has finished a manuscript it takes very little technical knowledge or money to turn it into an ebook and self-publish to Amazon or the iBookstore.

No matter how a novel gets released into the reading marketplace, unless a large publishing house has put its enthusiasm behind it, novelists soon find they have a second job to do, one they many times are ill-trained and have little temperament for, marketing their own work.

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An excellent example of the changing demands for the contemporary writer might be the case of the award-winning Texas writer C.W. Smith. An author of nine novels — the first published

in 1973 — numerous short stories and a memoir, Smith's latest work, *Steplings*, was recently published by TCU Press.

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Smith will be in Houston Tuesday night to read from *Steplings* at Brazos Bookstore. He spoke with CultureMap about the creation of his ninth novel and about his uneasy role in attempting to publicize his own book.

The plot thickens

Set in 2002, *Steplings* has the feel of a traditional coming of age novel mixed with a road story, yet the characters are realistically grounded in the problems and anxieties of our early 21st century. In the novel, 18-year-old high school dropout Jason and his 11-year-old step-sister, Emily, live in the same house as almost strangers. Jason and Emily have very little in common except that they both want to be somewhere that is not their suburban, blue collar Mesquite home.

After receiving a break up letter from his girlfriend, Lisa, a UT freshman, Jason decides to hitchhike to Austin to deliver an unfinished song he wrote about their love. Emily blackmails Jason into allowing her to come along so that she might see her emotionally and physically remote father, a UT professor.

As the two hitchhike the back highways of Texas, Emily's frantic mother believes Jason, who is facing an assault charge over a previous bout of stupidity, has kidnapped Emily and an Amber Alert is issued, as Jason's father, Burl, watches his tenuous control of the situation disintegrate.

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person.

On the Texas roads Jason and Emily meet a series of extraordinary characters who help Jason, for the first time, see beyond his narrow perspective. The meetings between the steplings and strangers never seem forced or unrealistic. I found Smith's depiction of a Texas filled with both banalities and amazing possibilities to be very real.

Smith didn't set out to depict Texas guided by any particular vision of the state; instead, he says it is simply the place he lives, explaining, "I know this city. I know this suburb. I know these highways. I know this flora, this fauna. I know these billboards. I know that corner. . . My familiarity with where I live just becomes a natural part of the fiction."

The novel takes place over a single weekend and focuses on "these two children being in this wounded family and their unwillingness to accept the situation and their attempts to pursue their own goals." Yet, the struggles of this one fictional Texas family probably mirror many real families across this nation.

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When I asked Smith about this pattern of rejected or miscommunications, he explained, "In a world where there's a lot of subterfuge and maneuvering and manipulating going on, how information is controlled becomes very much a part of the plot, part of people's plotting. It's a way people express their attitude about other people or express their need to hide or show parts of themselves."

It's up to the reader to decide if these themes connect with the novel's subtle, but ironic and bitter reminders that Jason's only way out of his messes might be the Iraq War.

Embracing social/commercial media

Smith decided to take an active role in promoting *Steplings* after his experience with his last novel, *Purple Hearts*, a book set during the Beaumont Riot of 1943. It was a finalist for the Writers' League of Texas Best Novel Award for 2009, but he says, "My last book I spent seven years on it, and I think it was a very ambitious book. . . It was published and stayed almost

invisible because I didn't do anything and I didn't know I was supposed to. Now that I know I'm supposed to I don't know if I can ever stand to do it again."

In order to "do" something for *Steplings*, Smith has warily embraced social media, but believes calling it social media is disingenuous, naming it instead "commercial media" because "The word social media is a misnomer. . .The line between commerce and social interaction has been blurred."

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Smith now has a website, novel facebook page, Twitter account and Youtube channel for videos for his reading and for *Steplings'* trailer because "now everybody's got a video." He feels all his efforts to sell the book have "yielded results but it's been hard." He explains, "It's just not something that comes naturally to most of us who write."

C.W. Smith's decades old literary reputation and those loyal readers perhaps give him an edge in the literary marketplace, but the recently retired SMU creative writing professor worries about the next generation of talented writers. "I've always had very talented students. I feel sorry for them trying to make their way through an industry that has changed so much it makes it difficult for young writers to get started. Not very many major houses will extend a hand to a young debut writer," he says.

He also realizes that "Paradoxically, even though it's hard to get published, it's very easy to get published in this new world in this [electronic] way." He notes that publishing used to be a much more "exclusive" world where publishing houses acted as "gatekeepers" between writers and readers. Yet, he wonders in this new inclusive world how writers will find their audience.

Many of the students Smith has taught and mentored have "great talent and they have great stories to tell and they tell them well but I just don't quite know how they're going to get them

out there to be heard.”

Interesting times, indeed.

Smith will read from his book, Steplings, and sign copies at 7 p.m. Tuesday night at Brazos Books.