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Texas novelist C.W. Smith has received just about every literary award the state and region bestow, and his latest work, the sprightly and wise *Steplings*, will no doubt add to his reputation as a Lone Star star.

Set in 2003, the book starts out in Dallas and, like its young protagonists, eventually makes its way to [Austin](#). Nineteen-year-old Jason and his 11-year-old stepsister, Emily, form the heart of the story. He's a boy-man adrift, missing his mother, who has died of cancer. Awkwardly entering adulthood, he's out of work and hoping, best-case scenario, that one of his applications to "all three [Mesquite](#) Pep Boys" will bear fruit.

Emily is reeling from her parents' divorce and her mother Lily's marriage to Jason's dad, Burl — a romance begun when the couple met at [Alcoholics Anonymous](#). (Burl had been sober, but his wife's death yanked him off the wagon.)

The new marriage, fraught with blended-family issues, is also haunted by the dead wife, as Burl stumbles on constant reminders of Sue: "In the kitchen utility drawer, a nightlight with a plastic translucent angel that Sue'd gotten for Jason's room when he was a baby ... a small muslin bag she'd stuffed with sage. ... It was a little as if Sue had been reincarnated as a pack rat who crept about at 2 a.m. planting those little land mines of memory."

When Jason decides to take off to Austin to find his AWOL girlfriend, Emily forcefully tags along to see her dad, who lives there. The relationship between the stepsiblings wobbles, then strengthens as they discover one another's passions, weaknesses and unexpected soul-pockets of fortitude. Back at home, the already-fraying ties between Lily and Burl come close to snapping, especially after Lily's fear results in an Amber Alert being issued and the police looking at Jason as a possible kidnapper and child molester.

Smith's narrative especially soars in scenes where Jason and Emily meet others on their way south. They hitch a ride with "wandering Africans" Jacob and Emmanuel, whose odor of "cooking oil, sweat and an unidentified spice that might've come from their food or something stowed in the van ... marked them as exotics." The sound of a male chorale purrs through their van from a CD or tape. It "lured Jason's ear, and when he asked about it, Jacob said, 'They are singing hymns in Dinka.'"

Smith's most abundant gift is his superb way with description, setting scenes with such veracity that the reader's senses are at once fully engaged. But he sometimes falls a bit too in love with a specific vision; the notion of a "swimming pool full of good vodka" is one that I'll never need to

encounter again.

*Steplings* comes to a completely realistic, bittersweet conclusion that will disappoint readers who like their endings tied in neat bows. But Smith is no fantasist — he's a writer who can be depended on to write life as he actually sees it, not as he (or we) might wish it were.

Steplings

**C.W. Smith**

(TCU Press, \$32.95)

Plan your life

C.W. Smith will read from and sign *Steplings* at 6:30 p.m. Thursday at the DeGolyer Library on the campus of Southern Methodist University, Dallas, and 5 p.m. Friday at the Texas Christian University Bookstore, Fort Worth.