



Former SMU English professor launches his ninth novel

By Natalie Posgate

Friends, family, ex-students and colleagues of C.W. Smith packed into the Degolyer Library's Stanley Marcus Reading Room Thursday night for the launch of his latest novel "Steplings."

"I'm so flattered to see so many former students, friends and family tonight," Smith said to the endeared crowd. "I'm often not in a room where I know so many people."

Smith's Writing Background

Smith is an acclaimed author and taught English at SMU for 31 years until he retired this past May. While teaching at SMU, he became a Dedman Family Distinguished Professor of English. He has nine novels, a collection of short stories, and a memoir published in his name.

Aside from Smith's long career as a professor and published author, he has played various roles in the workforce, including a musician, reporter, a carpenter and a newspaper deliverer.

Smith has received multiple awards for his works, which include the Jesse H. Jones Novel Award from the Texas Institute of Letters and the Southwestern Library Association Award for Best Novel.

Cuyler Etheredge, Smith's next-door neighbor, was among his close friends who attended the book launch.

"He really found a book for our time," Etheredge said. "He's had a stellar career and a number of compelling novels and this is one of my favorites."

Smith delighted the audience by reading a couple of excerpts from "Steplings," the ninth of his novels. After the excerpts, Smith answered questions from his readers.

The audience was very interested in Smith's methods for putting the novel together and asked questions involving his inspiration for writing "Steplings," what the writing process was like, and

what books he was reading while working on the novel.

'Steplings': A Novel of Contemporary Issues

Smith said that his inspiration for "Steplings" – though he strayed away from it once he started writing – came from a young woman he encountered while completing his Dobie-Paisano Fellowship at the University of Texas. He said the woman was a squatter who migrated to various places across the UT campus in search of food and shelter, such as classrooms, student dorms and the library. Smith knew he wanted to write about how the woman solved her homelessness by becoming a resident of the campus and the ethical concern involved with how people should deal with squatters.

"Steplings" is about 19-year-old Jason who goes on a journey to Austin with his stepsister Emily when their life at home in Mesquite becomes unbearable. Jason longs to mend the relationship with his high school girlfriend, a premed student at the University of Texas, while Emily seeks to live with her father, who is a professor at the university. The troubling, unexplained disappearance of Jason and Emily causes their parents to send out an Amber Alert and threatens to destroy the household that the newlyweds began to establish for themselves. Taking place during brink of the war in Iraq, "Steplings" commentates on the troubled youth and the dynamics of blended families that are prevalent in America today.

Many readers were astounded by the powerful message Smith delivered in "Steplings."

"One of the things that moved me the most is his sense of insight and painful evocation of stresses of the blended family," James Hopkins, SMU history professor, said.