



C.W. Smith and His Angsty Teens: Dallas Writer Releases New Novel, *Steplings*

By [Brentney Hamilton](#) Wed., Sep. 28 2011

SMU students may remember [C.W. Smith](#) as the curmudgeonly creative writing prof who had permanent dibs on a particular wooden chair in Dallas Hall; others know him as the mentor and ally who helped them find their voice, or who simply told them for the first time that they were good at something.

Smith left SMU this spring to pursue his own writing full-time and to enjoy a bit of the sweet life: traveling with his wife, Marcia; caring for a disabled -- but adorable -- geriatric pooch; kayaking up a storm on White Rock Lake; and endearingly ranting about local Realtors' jingoistic insistence that his lawn bear an American flag each Fourth of July. Former students held an impromptu retirement soiree at [Ozona Grill and Bar](#) (where Smith had historically held the last class of each semester), and if the turn-out was any indication of his influence as a teacher, Smith left a lasting impression on more than a few grateful SMU grads.

Smith has worked as a freelance film reviewer for the *Observer* and has also freelanced for other less-sophisticated (we kid, we kid) publications such as *Esquire* and *Texas Monthly*. As an artist, he has produced [nine novels, a collection of short stories and a memoir](#), and has been honored with a host of prestigious awards, including most recently the 2011 Lon Tinkle Award for "sustained excellence in a literary career" from the [Texas Institute of Letters](#). Smith awaits his newest release, *Steplings*, which hits stores tomorrow, September 29. Be sure to [RSVP](#) for a reception, reading and book signing beginning at 6 p.m. tomorrow evening at DeGolyer Library on the SMU campus.

Steplings details three days in the lives of 19-year-old Jason and 11-year-old Emily, children from strikingly different backgrounds, united both in the new home their parents have formed together, as well as their own respective desires to flee it. When the pair decide to do just that -- inadvertently and unknowingly eliciting an Amber Alert -- their impetuous hitchhike across Texas results in an even more dire situation for Jason, now legally an adult, and already awaiting a court date for assault charges stemming from an accident and its subsequent misunderstanding by an injured party.

As Jason spirals, we readers witness his naive attempts to heal overwhelming depression with love, substance and music, and we wonder helplessly at the grief-stricken young man's succession of bad decisions. Along the way, the precocious and charmingly "truculent" Emily finds, too, that home is not always where one has last left it. However, *Steplings* is not merely a coming-of-age novel -- while we see Jason and Emily come to terms with lives that neither have chosen, it is too the story of young people encountering seemingly insurmountable class systems that affect who they can and do love, as well as their options and futures.

If one were to highlight only one of Smith's talents as a writer, perhaps what stands as the best representation of his work and the clearest example of his artistic capacity is his ability to draw a reader so fully into his creative world that they are, at the concluding lines, loathe to leave it at all. Readers will find themselves worrying after Smith's protagonists long after the last page is turned, restlessly concerned for the dear souls of the very real young people -- a generation in combat boots -- who unknowingly and unintentionally inspired this all-too realistic contemporary tale. *Steplings* is the reflection of a true Texas writer who sees through hungry eyes both the paling dim of Dallas from its outskirts, and the brightest lights of an Austin stage.

We got our grubby paws on an advance copy and sat down recently with C.W. Smith to learn more from the man, himself. See our interview after the jump.

You've written about young adults before in *Country Music*, *Understanding Women*, and *Gabriel's Eye*. Why did you choose to write about young people again in this new novel? I like young adults; otherwise, I wouldn't have taught them for so long. Also I liked being one. But when you're young your torments are also heightened, intense, imprinting themselves on your lifelong memory. I've never set out to write a Young Adult novel; my idea of my audience is always someone who might like the kind of story I'm writing, and that always includes me. This

book probably is a cross-over, especially now that YA books have widened their audience by including more realistic material, the problems and issues, from the world at large.