

Book review: *Steplings* by C W Smith

Tue, 10/11/2011 - 19:55 — Bridget

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Steplings takes the reader an empathetic journey through the trials and pitfalls of teen years while exploring blended families and the odd relationships bred within them.

The story

Being a teenager is hard work, particularly for Jason. His mother is dead, his father has just come out of a severe alcoholic slide, and his childhood sweetheart has left him when he needs her the most; he's dropped out of school and doesn't know where his life is headed. His father, Burl, has got it together; he's married Lily, another recovered alcoholic, and now Jason has a step-mother and step-sister, Emily. But this hasn't helped his life get back on track and a series of bad choices have resulted in him having to appear before a court on an assault charge, and then, to make matters worse, his girlfriend Lisa sends him a "Dear John" letter from college and he tips over the edge.

But instead of being allowed to run away in peace to try and salvage the only good thing he has left, Emily insists on joining him on his journey to Austin - where her father lives. She has her own unhappiness and need to escape, and even though she's only eleven she outsmarts him and they end up on the road together, both searching for something outside of their own experience.

The style

This isn't really my kind of novel, and I was a bit trepidatious to start. However I was won over by the sincerity of the writing style. Written in the third person limited, *Steplings* primarily follows the perspectives of Jason and his father Burl. While at first I found the writing style self-conscious, I realised that it was actually because Jason is so convincingly written as a nineteen year old; young and foolhardy and filled with equal measures of bravado and lack of ability to take responsibility for his actions. The way this character thinks and behaves is just so real, and when the perspective shifts to Burl,

he is equally convincing as a beaten down alcoholic who is just trying to do the best for his son. So definitely points for empathy.

The three major peripheral characters - Lisa, Lily, and Emily - are only allowed to display a little of their perspective and they are mainly constructed by the way they are viewed by Burl and Jason. Keeping these characters relatively enigmatic works well; Jason, in typical teenager form, doesn't understand anybody as he is too self-absorbed, and particularly doesn't understand girls and women. His struggles and over-evaluations about what Lisa, Lily and Emily may or may not be thinking, and why they are behaving the way they are, stimulate the reader's empathy for Jason and help to build suspense.

While on the road, Jason and Emily have a variety of interactions with people who bring Jason out of his own mind, while revealing to the reader in bits and pieces the events leading up to Jason and Emily's adventure. The relationship of Jason and Emily is beautifully done while not over-analyzed; these aren't siblings, they have been thrown together by the arbitrary marriage of their parents. Jason is a screw-up but his heart is in the right place and his character makes self-conscious justifications that any reader will recall experiencing in their teens. All in all the joy out of reading this book is mainly in the journey and the characterization, and in these regards it is excellent.

Who is this book for?

I would recommend this book for young adults, probably those in their late teens. They will empathize with the characters while possibly learning from it.