

# KIRKUS

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# REVIEWS

## Steplings

**C.W. Smith**

Texas Christian University Press, \$32.95

Mapping a complex web of emotional ties and stress fractures, Texas suthor C.W. Smith constructs long paragraphs of rumination and painful flashbacks that move among all the major characters' points of view (with one significant exception).

Exercising a knack for making poor decisions, 19-year-old dropout Sanborn sets out one night to hitch from his Dallas suburb to Austin to confront his longtime girlfriend Lisa, who has just sent a "Dear John" letter from college — and finds himself saddled with 11-year-old stepsister Emily, desperate to see her divorced (and philandering) father.

Meanwhile, Sanborn's widowed father Burl and Emily's mother Lily, both recovering alcoholics, find their efforts to forge a marriage sharply challenged by their children's unexplained disappearance. The author tucks in complications and minor adventures for all, plus a realistic if poignant resolution, but these only form a backdrop for his exploration of each character's constellation of strengths and flaws.

Self-analytical teen readers who find plenty to ponder in the heads of Sanborn, Burl, Emily and Lisa may be disappointed, though, that the author never gives Emily a fair chance to have her say.

"Steplings" is slow, a little weak in the plot department, but rich in psychological insight and lit by occasional flashes of humor.

C.W. Smith will be at the Texas Book Festival Oct. 22-23.