

'Steplings' on target

Author Smith delivers in latest novel about a blended family.

By Robert Flynn, Special to the Express-News

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Last year C.W. Smith received an award from the Texas Institute of Letters for "Lifetime Achievement." Happily, Smith's lifetime achievement is not yet complete and a new novel, "Steplings," is proof of it.

Jason and Emily are step-siblings in a family blended from two former families when rupture replaced rapture.

Their blended parents met at AA meetings and the new stepson and stepdaughter have no reason to love or trust half of the new organization. The same is true of the new step-parents. Since his mother's death, 19-year-old Jason has dropped out of high school and made other bad choices resulting in charges of assault. Eleven-year-old Emily is smart and smart-mouthed. Jason's first and only girlfriend, Lisa, attends the University of Texas at Austin. Upon receipt of a letter from Lisa saying she wants to be "friends," Jason leaves chores unfinished, precipitating an argument with his father that ends with the father receiving a head gash that requires stitches. The new wife believes she must accompany her new husband to a "doc-in-the-box" for stitches, leaving her only child with a stepson who doesn't make good choices.

Jason, facing a court-date in three-days, decides to go see Lisa and sing her the song he has been writing for her, winning back her heart.

Emily, whose real father is a UT professor, says she is going to hitchhike with him. When he refuses to take her Emily threatens to hitchhike alone. That he can't permit, but says she must leave a note for her mother. Emily says she has already written the note but Jason doesn't check to be sure, and they start off on a frightening but sometimes hilarious adventure. For them.

For the parents, it's a nightmare of fear, worry and infighting as the father tries to protect his son and the mother tries to save her daughter from a boy running from charges of assault. Because of the mother's insistence, Emily's age and Jason's court date, an Amber Alert is issued and the situation escalates both at home and on the road. The trip also offers tantalizing glimpses of the Austin scene, Town Lake, Sixth Street, Guadalupe Street, the University.

Smith, the author of nine novels, a collection of short stories and a memoir, and for many years a creative writing professor at Southern Methodist University, sharply delineates these “steplings,” their parents, their all-too-human self-absorption, their games, strategies, comedies and bad choices to which every family is heir.

The suspense will keep you hurrying through the pages. The humor comes through memories of your own teen years, your own marriage, your own parenthood with its sudden joys, lasting worries and the perpetual question: Who is this kid that you thought you knew?

Smith provides a magnifying mirror in which parents will recognize their image and teen-agers can learn a few things about parents and teenagers. You will be dismayed by the choices both parents and children make. You will be reminded of the dumb things you did, and you'll want to shout at them to stop, to think about what they are doing and the consequences of their actions. You will also understand the need that drives them, the need for a family where you will always be at home.

It's a wonderful story for parents and should be required reading for teens to meet this ordinary family and share those three extraordinary days with them. They will break your heart but you'll also want to hug them and welcome them home. And wonder at the end if Jason again made a bad choice.

Texas novelist Robert Flynn taught writing at Trinity University for decades.

Read more: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/entertainment/books/article/Steplings-on-target-2228590.php#ixzz1bSPIDgHd>