

Star-Telegram

BY DAVID MARTINDALE

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Sometimes an author just never knows where the next story idea will come from -- or where it will lead.

Consider C.W. Smith, a North Texas novelist whose latest is *Steplings* (TCU Press, \$32.95). The retired Southern Methodist University professor was musing about the audacity of a "squatter" on campus, and somehow that morphed into a coming-of-age, road-trip adventure involving a 19-year-old lovesick boy and his 11-year-old stepsister.

"It's very odd," Smith says. "I don't always know why things take the direction they take." So he says, but don't believe for a minute that he wasn't in complete control of his work. Not only does Smith deftly enter the head of 19-year-old Jason, a troubled high-school dropout from Mesquite who gets a "Dear John" letter from his college girlfriend, but he's also at home inhabiting the thoughts of Jason's exasperated dad, whose new marriage is quickly coming apart.

It's elegantly written, sometimes funny, often heartbreaking, and it never hits a false note.

Here is the situation that provided the germ of Smith's story idea:

"Years ago we had a squatter on the campus," he recalls. "She was sleeping on the couches in the library and the lounges and going into the break rooms and getting food and passing herself off as a student.

"None of which has anything to do with my present book except that when Jason and Emily get to Austin, they spend one night in the UT library. That's the only connection.

"The first thing that happened after that was I changed it from a squatter to a young guy who had come to campus to find the girl who had dumped him. And my story took off from there." *Steplings*, Smith's ninth novel, isn't the first book in which he has channeled the thoughts of a teenager. *Understanding Women*, published by TCU Press in 1998, was narrated by a 16-year-old.

"Being that young is still vivid for me," he says. "I think I have more trouble imagining myself in the mind of someone my own age."

Smith retired in May. But only now, with summer over, is he beginning to feel "an instructional itch" that he can't scratch. "I know I'm going to miss having the company of smart young people," he says.

The award-winning author wasn't always a man of letters.

"I read a lot as a kid, but I never thought about being a writer," Smith says. "In fact, I remember in high school that we had the choice between taking an English course that would be of the college level and required a lot of writing and a less-demanding English course that would allow you to build a guillotine when you read *A Tale of Two Cities*. I chose the second one."

But while studying at the University of North Texas in Denton, he discovered Steinbeck, Faulkner and Dostoevsky and was hooked.

"There were books that spoke to me," he says. "I read all of the "Cannery Row" series right off the bat, and I felt that I was encountering characters in Steinbeck that I had never seen represented in literature, this blue-collar world that I was very familiar with when I worked in the oil fields. I thought, 'Oh, man, you can write about things like this?' And the more I read this kind of stuff, the more I wanted to write it."

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