
WHITE ROCK LAKE WEEKLY



Award-winning professor launches new book

By Lucy Higginbotham

It's funny how events in your youth can circle back to you later in life. When Charles William (C.W.) Smith was an oil field hand-loading pipe onto trucks, he probably didn't think it would show up in one of his novels decades later.

But it did, and so did several other events from his life that informed the themes and events of many of his nine novels.

His newest publication, "Steplings," hits the book signing tour next week at SMU's DeGolyer Library on Thurs., Sept. 29. An hors d'oeuvre reception celebrates the launch from 6-6:30 p.m. followed by a reading and signing until 8 p.m.

The book even has a trailer on YouTube.

It is appropriate that SMU begins his multi-city tour because he has been a professor of creative writing there since 1980 and served as a Dedman Family Distinguished Professor in the English department. Currently, he does not have a class load and plans to officially retire next May.

"Nobody ever had a better job, but it feels a little weird not to be teaching or preparing lessons right now," he said.

"I don't miss the involuntary reading, but I will miss being around smart young people."

Smith's career as a writer spans several decades and genres including novels, short stories, a memoir, and non-fiction. For a short time during the 80s and 90s, he penned the ethics column for *Esquire* magazine and was a film critic for *Texas Monthly*. Prior to that he was a reporter and film critic for *The Dallas Times Herald*.

The process of writing has sometimes been a struggle, but always rewarding.

"It has taken an average of two to three years to produce a book. You write what you can write,

and I read a lot of fiction as a kid. I was addicted to creating imaginary worlds, plus they're cheap to build," he added with a wry smile.

Sometimes the process bogs him down.

"I enjoy research, but it confuses you – what to keep in and what to leave out. My initial manuscript for 'Purple Hearts' was 1000 pages but got pared down to 438," he said.

Sometimes feedback from peers makes him rethink his project.

"All three of my friends had the same feedback for 'Steplings,' that it takes off about page 140. And I thought 'I'm in deep doo doo if it doesn't take off until page 140,' so I had to re-structure the plot," he continued.

His imaginary worlds traverse space and time from World War II ("Purple Hearts") to the oil fields in Oklahoma and New Mexico ("Understanding Women" and "Buffalo Nickel") to here in Texas where others are set ("Gabriel's Eye" and "Steplings.")

His resume is filled with more awards than you can shake an eraser at and includes some prestigious kudos from the literary world such as twice winning the Jesse H. James Novel Award from the Texas Institute of Letters and twice landing the National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowships.

Three themes seem to emerge from his nine novels. Three books concern the lives of young men, their love troubles and coming of age.

"I suppose that part of my life made a big impression on me," Smith mused.

Others address the racial and cultural conflicts in the Southwest where Smith has spent his life.

"Those are features of the world I grew up in. They still are a feature. It interested me to take on the conflicts around me," he said.

Marriage, in both its supportive and unsavory forms, creates the foundation for four other publications.

With no more papers to grade, Smith spends more time puttering around his home down the street from St. Thomas Aquinas, discussing literature with fellow writers in what he calls his "Alice Munroe Lunches," named after his favorite short story author, and embracing voluntary reading.

"I long for the day when I can read a whole issue of *The New Yorker*," he sighed.

He is a one-book-at-a-time kind of reader and has a varied palette. His most unusual flavor of choice? Harlequin Romance novels. In Spanish.

You might find Smith teaching adult literacy, cycling, kayaking on White Rock Lake, or playing with his three grandchildren. His daughter, Holly, also an SMU grad, designed his website, which "overwrites the one I made of string and sticks and old tin foil," and encouraged (insisted?) he get a Facebook page.

To learn more about the author and his writings, visit his webpage, cwsmiththeauthor.com or on Facebook.