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Inside and outside BALD SUN

Slammer. By Ben Greer. 268 pages. Atheneum. \$8.95.

Country Music. By C. W. Smith. 305 pages. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$8.95.

Two recent novels infer convincing universality from sharply observed and delineated localisms. Ben Greer's "Slammer" is a South Carolina prison; the novel's floodlights are trained on the meshed fates of four men: two inmates, the in-house priest, and a well-meaning, naive young guard. It is claustrophobic and tense, formally glued together, shaped toward a sober, frightening climax.

"Country Music" is the second novel by C. W. Smith (whose first, "Thin Men of Haddam," won regional prizes and was widely admired). It's the enjoyable, rowdy saga of an endearing southwestern Lothario, Bobby Joe Gilbert; the ambitions and disappointments that cloud his horny young life; and the several lively women who embody, or complicate, them. The action is, simultaneously, loose and confined—like coins slapping about in the pockets of skintight dungarees. Things ravel toward an open conclusion; futures are, credibly, undecided; still, the familiar adventure has the pleasing contours of a well-tooled finished product, even though nothing really gets concluded.

"Slammer" tells, from the alternating perspectives of its four protagonists, an oftentold story of forces in conflict: The utopian improvements of idealists are counterpointed against the harsh facts known by hardened realists. Helpless innocents submit to homosexual rapes, and find safety in corruption. The disharmony between inmates and their keepers is paralleled by the struggle between white and black men, spiraling toward a weeklong riot, and culminat-

ing in a rash of murders that will re-establish the old dominance of might and injustice.

Triteness disguised

Ben Greer (who was a prison guard, briefly) tells his horrendous tale with a concentrated intensity that frequently disguises its inherent triteness. The "good" guard is straight out of any dozen television dramas. Tough-as-nails Father Breen is the Pat O'Brien character ("... he knew he could not be a holy man, but he hoped to be strong"). Black revolutionist Moultrie is quite unbelievable (though there's a disturbing irony—possibly unintended by the author—in his guerrilla methods: trying to protect his "brothers" from the black victimizer who hooks them on drugs, Moultrie uses dope—to secure the services of a free-lance ice-pick murderer, known as "the Angel of Death").

Images of light/darkness signify freedom/enclosure, or comprehension / ignorance. Greer's undistinguished style reveals a high tolerance for formula melodramatics (Breen quells the riot singlehandedly). But the book never relaxes its clammy grip on the small, arid patch of territory it covers. Whether he's detailing the intricate economics of prison life; sketching the scrubby cottonwoods outside that beckon like palatial vistas; exploring the pathetic memory-trips his characters travel; or tracking the cancer-riddled, gaunt "Angel" through the sewer pipes on his deadly missions — Greer knows what effects he wants, and bends every resource to the making of them. The novel's sheer bullheaded determination is what makes it work. Besides, Ben Greer is only 25, and will get better.

C. W. Smith is, already, about as good as a writer

needs to be. "Country Music" has the same appeal as nostalgia-kick movies like "American Graffiti." But its affectionate chronicling of young highjinks in a Texas tanktown in the mid-1950's is deepened by forceful characterizations and a flexible, probing prose style. When Most-Likely-To-Stud Bobby Joe Gilbert finds himself on the horns of a "whirlwind courtship," the phrase scratches and teases at his canny mind—and Smith thus renders the way it bothers him:

"... as he thought about it the image grew dark, more like a tornado or a waterspout, then he could see it transformed into a whirlpool in the vast reaches of an ocean, as as huge as the eye of a hurricane, its arms spiraling out to suck him into its bottomless maw."

There are many such passages in this beautifully written novel—where nothing much happens, except that vigorous, crazy-as-hell, confused young people grow up a little at a time, try on various styles of belief and behavior, attempt (without much success) to stifle their basic orderliness and imperfection. There is a scandal in Bobby Joe's past—but it's not so much an incident as it is an indicator of the stingy compulsions that have boxed him into a life and reputation from which nothing helps to extricate him. He goes to "State" college, hangs around with his (lesbian) good buddy, "Pinball Polly," marries a blond-headed vacuum whose life's ambition is to become a Kilgore Rangerette, and ends up haunting the "Sonic Dog" takeout stand with beer-drinking cronies, plus Nelda Sue, the girl who won't be left behind, no matter how hard Bobby Joe works to convince her what a worthless bastard he

is. They are all "... afraid of life, of having graduated, of having lost the comforting structure of classes and games and dances and projects." And, they are irresistible; every one.

Fortunately, there are still no limits on the ways novels can work. "Slammer" takes you inside its confined world, hardens you to the life it contains; then, ominously closes down. "Country Music," a little more lifelike, a lot looser, invites you outside—and, it seems to me, sort of shuffles and hesitates, asking you what you intend to do about the challenge it has posed.

I think Smith's novel is, therefore, the better one. But I wouldn't send you away from either one of these books.

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