

Review of Country Music by C.W. Smith in Chicago Sun-Times

Life among the sleazy low-lifers of west Texas

COUNTRY MUSIC By C. W. Smith. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$8.95.

By Catherine Petroski

Before all the plastic got to country music, its lyrics established a fictional world rife with unrequited love, goings-on between hard men and rotten women, violence and injustice of every sort. An old time country ballad, modernized and refined and extended to novel form, is what C. W. Smith gives us with his new book.

In this, his second novel about west Texas, Smith seems to have a problem settling on the degree of realism with which he would treat characters. While much of the time he prefers a literal and fascinating rendering in the manner of Norman Mailer's or Truman Capote's evolved journalism, more than occasionally the writing itself becomes the book's subject matter. What predominates in "Country Music," however, is the story.

It deals with what Texans call "low-life": a pack of seedy, loose-living characters, ignorant and gross and ordinarily pretty unappealing. Yet this novel makes them appealing. B. J. (Bobby Joe) Gilbert, whose story "Country Music" tells, is what was known at the time of the story (1960) as a hood, albeit a misunderstood one. B.J. is a hotrodder, an industrious and inventive sort who has resurrected a 1952 Ford and made it the envy of Hederville. His only other occupation is girls, with whom he is equally industrious and inventive. With horror we observe a chain of decisions B.J. half makes, for B.J. exhibits no control over himself, much less his fate. On a whim he goes to college, where he gets sick and disgusted, drops out, gets married, gets sick of his wife, kicks her out and tries to start all over again. At book's end B.J. doesn't really seem much more capable of managing his affairs than he was at the start.

Smith has made all that interesting enough, but there are other pluses. There is humor: We are treated to B.J. in every manner of ridiculous situation, from a riotous account of Jimmy Dean in "Giant" to an unlikely insight into a beauty parlor. There is the language: Smith revels in the Texan idiom. There is suspense: The mystery of what *really* happened to Delores Wilson tugs us along at each chapter's close. There is conscious, integral imagery: The device of the mirrors unifies one whole aspect of B.J.'s personality. There is fantasy: B.J. regularly flees into his imagination, as do one or two others. There is an inconspicuous social statement: The unfulfilled lives of Hederville are symptomatic of all of Texas, and more.

Some things have gone awry, the most troubling being the obtrusion of the author. It's not that Smith manipulates too much — but perhaps not enough, and certainly with too little subtlety. B.J. and C.W. Smith may share certain feelings and experiences, but for an author to invest many very unlikely, pedantic and literary kinds of sentiments and reactions in characters he's built as something other seems destructive to the creation. The confrontation between Nelda Sue, B.J.'s old girl friend, and Ginger, his temporary wife, for instance, comes out more like a debate between William F. Buckley and John Kenneth Galbraith than two country girls having it out. One wonders how Nelda Sue, an archetypal dumb broad, can be made to utter a word like "fontanel." Many works violate the principle of verisimilitude but here, rather than a wedding of artifice and reality, we have a war.

But "Country Music" is eminently readable, and with the well-received "Thin Men of Haddam and now "Country Music" behind him, and with a book of stories and still another novel forthcoming C.W. Smith seems well launched into a career that bears watching.

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