

. . . and new novel supports him

COUNTRY MUSIC, by C. W. Smith. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$8.95.

In this thoroughly satisfying novel, C. W. Smith spins the tragi-comic tale of Bobby Joe Gilbert, "Hedorville's Bane to Virgins and Most Unlikely to Succeed," and in the process provides considerable insight into the complexities of human relationships and the options in life that most of us really have.

Country Music is full of remarkably well-drawn characters, not the least of which is Bobby Joe himself, who spends his time cruising the Sonic Dog in search of "Sweet Things," stirring up trouble at the local high school, and wondering what to do with his life, while hanging over his world like an ugly Texas storm cloud is the name of Delores Wilson, a girl for whose death he is vaguely blamed.

Sensitive and intelligent, Bobby Joe longs to escape both his reputation and the limitations of Hedorville, including "Same-as-Always" Nelda Sue, whose self-sacrificial love he doesn't want and whose own intelligence and sensitivity he ignores. A disastrous semester at State U. makes clear, however, that the most binding limitation of all may be one's own self-image.

There he meets Polly, a Lesbian pinball fanatic who is the first woman not to respond to his "macho" ideas of masculinity and who almost succeeds in tearing down the psychic defenses he has spent a lifetime putting up.

Frightened by his own vulnerability, Bobby Joe tries to escape by marrying Ginger, a curvaceous and manipulative 19-year-old "Total Woman," and retreating to a job in Hedorville as parts manager at the local Ford agency. But Ginger's childishness and shallowness and their mutual inability to deal with the complexities of marriage bring their life together to an abrupt end.

Ultimately, Bobby Joe's growing dissatisfaction with himself forces him to face the

truth of his complicity in Delores Wilson's death and of his failure to love, to see others as anything beyond means to satisfy his own needs.

Armed with new self-knowledge, Bobby Joe accepts responsibility and returns to Nelda Sue, who has done some maturing of her own, but Smith is too honest for any promise of "and they lived happily ever after." One knows somehow that Nelda Sue is right: "We deserve something better . . . I can see me ten years from now as a matron with an apron around my barrel waist, and I won't be desirable. You were right, I *am* a clinger, and you're the kind of person who can't stand being clung to."

Not only does Smith have a genius for the details that define character (besides Bobby Joe, Nelda Sue, Polly and Ginger, the members of the Hedorville crowd — Heavy, Lonnie, Rabbit and Jackie Gayle — and the sad little waif Delores are all expertly realized), he is adept at creating dramatic situations as well.

Certain particularly memorable scenes stand out: A dialogue between Bobby Joe and Nelda Sue which takes place atop a pumping jack; Bobby Joe's very funny unsuccessful attempt to seduce Ginger at a drive-in movie while Edna Ferber's "Giant" plays out its drama of Texas wealth and passion in cinemascope and technicolor; and finally, Bobby Joe's convincing and moving epiphany, skillfully interweaving memories of the night of Delores Wilson's death with Lonnie's and Rabbit's drunken mauling of Candy, the Life-Sized Inflatable Playgirl, in the backseat of Heavy's car during an almost fatal attempt to take "Killer Curve" at high speed.

Country Music is set in West Texas, but Hedorville could be anywhere. Drive-ins, roller rinks and trailer parks are not regional phenomena. And neither are some very powerful truths about human limitations and the high cost of maturity. — SUSAN WOOD