

Review of Country Music by CW Smith in Los Angeles Times

Bobby Joe Gilbert -Hud as Hun

BY JAMES M. MARTIN

Country Music by C. W. Smith (Farrar, Straus & Giroux: \$8.95)

Larry McMurtry once suggested that Texas literature had coped fairly well with the "physical circumstances" of life in the Lone Star State, while the Texan's "emotional experience" remained largely unexplored. The place to start, it seemed to him, was with the relations of the sexes - certainly a theme with which McMurtry himself was familiar. In fact, by the time he struggled with the abortive miscreation that was "All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers," McMurtry, like an oilman who has depleted the hydrocarbons of a once-rich field, was forced to strike out for "gracencr" pastures.

As if taking McMurtry's cue, C. W. Smith has seized upon the above-mentioned theme and given it a perceptive and puissant working-out. Those of us who struggled through adolescence in a rednecked world of weekend beer busts and fumbling intimacies in the back rows of drive-in theaters can only marvel at the keenness of vision and accuracy of tone. But "Country Music" is no mere bittersweet coming-of-age-in-the-provinces, no hayseed Summer of '60; nor is it an American Graffiti on the backhouse wall.

Rather, it is a parable on the destructiveness of disguising guilt with swagger, of perpetrating a lie to protect a lie. The liar in this case is Bobby Joe Gilbert, who may be the most perfectly delineated symbol of Texas macho miscreancy since McMurtry's immortal Hud in "Horseman Pass By."

B. J.'s a scoundrel all right, a seducer of evangelists' darling daughters who likes his Pearl leer icy and his women torrid. He goes to college to learn what his high school history teacher meant when he called him a Hun; he expunges himself from a beautiful friendship with a sensitive Sapphic woman because she wants him to see himself for what he really is; he marries a ninny of a bouffanted carhop just to surmount the obstacle of her quaint conviction that "a girl's virginity is a very special treasure and can't be opened except with a very special key."

Worst of all, he sets out to systematically destroy a naive but caring young woman, possibly the only person who has ever loved him despite his cruelty and masochism. He is callous and calculating; he has a genius, as one character puts it, "for making other people look stupid." And yet he is himself the victim of a tragic vulnerability, and it is the subtlety with which the author strips Gilbert to that core of defenselessness which makes this antihero so totally captivating, so very much like us all.

But lest you get the impression that "Country Music" is some casuist morality play, it should be said that it's first a picaresque excursion, larded with ribaldry, into the satiric

and the sensuous. I cannot remember having laughed so long or loud over a scene such as Bobby Joe's coitus interrupts with the carhop, which manages to counterpoint an absurd attempted seduction with a running synopsis and critique of that ersatz Texas saga, "Giant,"

Perhaps nicest of all—and Texophiles will forgive this prodigal's chauvinism—Smith captures indelibly that elusive quality which has been termed "spirit of place." His teenagers don't eat cheeseburgers, but chicken-fried steaks. Girls don't take pills; boys buy Trojans, Everybody drinks Pearl or Jax. They go to Concan or Garner Park or to the Pecos River for holidays and semester breaks. Gutsy guys wear black Wellington boots. Everyone still worships James Dean or the Brando of "The Wild Ones." Penetrated virgins arc scored like notches on a gunman's .44. After the "Northers" of November, a "sunny calm" follows in December. Young men get initiated into the mysteries of sex with a drunken spree in the bordellos of a "boys' town" south of the border. And having a "future" consists of getting a job at the Ford agency.

Which might all sound rather hopelessly backward and mindless to a "foreigner," but it's the Texas some of us know and love. Just to catalogue these mundane provincialisms should spark in the nostalgic expatriate a sympathetic chord in tune with this refrain by Gary P.Nunn;

*I wanna go home with the armadillo.
To country music from Amarillo,
And I believe
The prettiest women
And the friendliest people
You've ever seen.*

Although Smith quotes from Carl Perkins, Kitty Wells and Johnny Cash, I'd like to think he took his title from the lines above.

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