

Avenger turns into his own worst enemy

Smythe's pursuit of a murderous small-time robber baron throws him into his own nets

HUNTER'S TRAP

By C.W. Smith (Texas Christian University Press, \$22.50)

By Tom Pilkington

C.W. Smith's *Hunter's Trap* is a brooding tale of psychological suspense, a literary film noir. The novel's protagonist, Wilbur Smythe (a.k.a. Will Hunter), embarks on a plan to take revenge on William Kale, a banker. Smythe blames Kale for the deaths of his pregnant wife and his employer, David Copperfield, a wealthy

Kiowa who appears as a character in an earlier novel by Mr. Smith, *Buffalo Nickel* (1989).



SMITH

Set mainly in Depression-era El Paso, the story actually begins in turn-of-the-century Oklahoma, and a sizable chapter of it is played out in 1920s Los Angeles. The book's social and political undercurrents are strong.

Smythe grows up a poor boy in rural Oklahoma. He despises the high-and-mighty Kale and his sheltered but snooty daughter, and he is contemptuous of his mother, who is obviously having an affair with Kale.

Years later, when it appears that Kalé, who has participated in the systematic fleecing of oil-rich American Indians, has planted a bomb aboard Copperfield's yacht, thus accidentally killing Smythe's wife, Smythe's rage is uncontrollable. He sets out to exact a

terrible vengeance by using Sissy, Kale's daughter, as the instrument of revenge. From that point, the plot moves to its gory conclusion with the inevitability of tragedy.

Hunter's Trap is a gripping tale. It fits loosely into a popular fictional genre from the 1940s and '50s, powerfully practiced by the likes of James M. Cain and Jim Thompson. The narrative has no heroes. Its villain is "savagely human nature" (to quote one of the book's

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Hunter becomes prey

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Mr. Smith, in seductively straightforward prose, ushers us into an emotional morass. Smythe struggles to reconcile his "two selves — the public and cooperative self, and the raging demon beneath that screamed to be let go." He must walk a tightrope between the quotidian "normality" of the world without and the turbulent darkness of the world within.

The story evolves smoothly into an enactment of one of the most durable motifs in literature: the dopelgänger. Slowly but surely the reader comes to understand that Smythe's hatred and his obsessive stalking of Kale have lowered Smythe to Kale's moral level; he has become Kale's double.

Smythe begins his baleful quest impelled by grief at his wife's death, but even he dimly recognizes that grief is not an adequate explanation for the savage intensity of his emotions. His rage, he admits to himself, is "somehow inspired by Kale but could not precisely be said to be caused by him." His motivation is so urgent, so irrational, it can only be described as infantile and Oedipal.

Kale is a one-dimensional but believable robber baron (on a minor scale). His hatred of Indians may seem out of proportion, even un-

called for, but its roots are in unacknowledged guilt. He has tried to rob Copperfield — and other Indians — of their fortunes, rationalizing his behavior on grounds that a rich Indian is an affront to Anglo civilization.

One of the most perceptively drawn characters in the novel is Sissy. Sissy manipulates Smythe with a kind of cunning innocence. She is rebellious, yet she remains loyal to her class and family. She indulges her selfishness and carelessness (qualities characteristic of the rich, according to F. Scott Fitzgerald), which under different circumstances, Smythe realizes, could have proved deadly to himself.

The ending of *Hunter's Trap* is abrupt, stark and bloody. Given what has gone before, it seems completely appropriate. The book is a suspenseful page-turner in the sense that it immediately draws the reader into a shadowy world of paranoia, deception and revenge. It lingers in the mind, however, as a dark meditation on the limits of human rationality and the seething primal forces that always threaten to unravel the social fabric.

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