

TEXAS TEMPEST

GOTCHA!

Mystery makes you wonder: Who is the hunted?

By **ROBERT OWENS**
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

Revenge is a dirty business.
Disorienting, too.

Take Wilbur Smythe.
Having assumed a false
identity to get closer to the two
men he blames for the death of
his wife and unborn child, he
suddenly kills one of them with
a straight razor, but not before
he takes a phone call from a
teen-age girl — the daughter of
the other culprit. All this within
the first 10 pages.

As Smythe — who has
taken the name Hunter —
heads for the lass's home, in
the midst of the action, he and
the reader are transported from
Depression-era El Paso to West
Texas in the '20s, the scene of
Smythe/Hunter's unhappy
boyhood.

So begins a pattern of
flashback/flash forward that
forms the structure of this
border-noir thriller, an intricate
web of tragedy woven from
strands of Smythe's past.

As we meet his cranky
drunk of a stepfather, learn of
his mother's mysterious past,
and encounter an even more
enigmatic gentleman who
comes to call at the family's
rundown farmhouse, threads of
greed, lust and betrayal emerge
before the action shifts back to
the "present" 1930s.

As a teen-ager, Smythe flees
from Dallas to California,
where he finds work for a
wealthy Kiowa he knew in
Texas; he performs tasks that
"invisible" Native Americans,
even oil-wealthy ones, cannot
do themselves, such as scouting
out business deals in the all-
white commercial world.

Wilbur also meets the love of
his life — Bobette, a flirtatious
librarian.

But he finds his present
happiness on the West Coast
contains no antidote to the
poison from his Texas past. An
explosion aboard the Indian's
yacht kills Bobette and her
fetus, and a trail of clues leads
back to El Paso, bringing the
narrative full circle and
propelling Smythe toward a
bloody denouement.

This is all more artful than it
might sound. As in his previous
novels, especially *Country
Music* and *Buffalo Nickel*,
SMU English Professor C.W.
Smith (a former Dobie-Paisano
writing fellowship recipient)
exhibits a flair for Texas local
color. His descriptions of the El
Paso/Juarez border area in
particular are vivid and precise.

Hunter's Trap

By C.W. Smith

Fiction

TCU Press, \$22.50

Smith also quickly sketches
memorable characters through
dialogue and detail. It takes
only a few bold strokes to paint
Sissy, the teen-ager
Smythe/Hunter appears to be
pursuing, as a naive, spoiled
kid: "We'll be oh so so-phisti-
cated! I'll wear a trayz chick
negligee."

This is an offbeat whodunit,
not forceful or propulsively
paced in the usual modern
sense, but carefully crafted.
Smith's narrative gift is such
that he even charms the reader
past crucial plot points. These
are rediscovered only after a
final-page "gotcha" ending
sends the reader flipping
backward to find them. Thus is
the reader caught in Smith's
trap.