

Review of C.W. Smith's novel, *Hunter's Trap* in **Kirkus Reviews** 8/1/96

Beautifully bitter Depression-era revenge melodrama in which good guys lose, good women die, and virtue's reward is unreasonable tragedy.

More a retelling of Smith's fourth novel (*Buffalo Nickel*, 1989) than a sequel to it, the story here examines the misguided destiny of Wilbur Smythe, a fatherless man who becomes an amanuensis to David Copperfield, the oil-rich Kiowa Indian hero of *Buffalo Nickel*. Sensitive to abuses of trust and faith, Wilbur zealously protects Copperfield's business interests but is incapable of keeping Copperfield's femme fatale wife, Laura, from having affairs with Hollywood ne'er-do-wells. Wilbur survives an apparent boating accident that kills his own pregnant wife, Bobette, as well as Copperfield. He suspects foul play when Laura contests her dead husband's will with help from a new business partner, shiftily Oklahoma land speculator Bill Kale. Wilbur knows Kale as a sneering swell who made Wilbur's mother his mistress while double-crossing Wilbur's drunken stepfather. Could Kale, who hates Indians, and his loathsome henchman John Bliss, be responsible for additional "accidents" that deprived other well-to-do Indians of their wealth? Without obtaining any proof of their culpability, Wilbur becomes morbidly obsessed with revenge. He gives himself a new name, Will Hunter, and persuades Kale, now living the good life in El Paso, to hire him as a secretary. He then romances Kale's ingenuous daughter, Sissy, who imagines herself eloping with her husband-to-be as Will uses her to entrap her father. Veering between despairing glimpses of empty prairies and gruesome south-of-the-border sex scenes, Smith pushes Faulkner's technique of "portraying the heart in conflict with itself" to gritty excess. Wilbur is a tormented victim and tortured victimizer, and it's his sense of decency that brings on the final catastrophe.

A dark, festering, erotic, Jim Thompionesque dead-ender that simmers into a brooding bildungsroman, reminiscent of Thomas McGuane's macho head-butting duels but without his loopy humor or wry insights.