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Characters are becalmed, bothered and bewildered

LETTERS FROM THE HORSE LATITUDES

By C.W. Smith (Texas Christian University Press, \$19.95)

By Lynna Williams

The explorer Magellan, Texas writer C.W. Smith has a character in this collection tell us, once led his own fleet into "the Horse Latitudes because he knew that no sailor in his right mind would deliberately veer off into that vast water-desert barren of wind."

Magellan and his ships survived, but no one aboard ever forgave him the journey. The characters in these 11 stories, too, find themselves adrift in strange places, often without the resources of heart and of mind needed to survive, or even understand the full value of what may be lost.

In different ways, the stories in *Letters from the Horse Latitudes* are about territory and difference, about all that distances human beings from each other and, much less often, brings them together again.

Several of the stories use Mexico as their setting: "Child Guidance" shows us a mistrustful North Ameri-

can's relationship with a young Mexican boy, who the American is sure will cheat him at every opportunity. When the boy, Henry, first meets the Americans, they sit around thinking up movie plots about him.

The story's narrator says, "Jack thought we should make the protagonist a cynical, down-and-out priest whose hope is restored by a child's simple act of faith, but neither of us could think of a simple act of faith." That line, tossed off so knowingly by the speaker, is at the heart of the story; we may understand, perhaps even share, his attitudes as the story begins, but with every word spoken, he shows himself to be an corrosive combination of cynicism and arrogance. The story leaves no doubt, finally, who is at risk in the encounter between the poor and the privileged.

"Domestic Help," another first-person narrative set in Mexico, deals with the speaker's realizations about his own life, reached as he watches the predicament of a North American misfit, a woman living alone in a Mexican village. A prickly and profane loner, Vera is at odds with the culture, but she

knows something about learning from her mistakes.

Two stories in this collection have more familiar settings, but just as difficult terrain: "Tickler" deals with a man's new understanding of the lasting effect of childhood events, and "The Plantation Club" shows a young man's new, and hard-won, awareness of the way the world works.

In the second story, two white high school boys are drawn into the orbit of a jazz club in the black section of a small New Mexico town. The boys are into acquiring props to suit their image of themselves as daring young men, and they don't stop at saxophones and berets. When they're caught with marijuana the police believe a black musician has supplied, they acquire an adult understanding of unequal justice.

The title story in the collection is a letter to a father from his son, a boy who "played war" and was in love with Hollywood images of soldiers' glory, and who grew up to be first a Marine, then an AWOL Marine, then an AWOL Marine living in Canada during the Vietnam War.

"Dad," the story begins, "your visit and our parting have stirred up things I'd long since hoped were still for good. Your every gesture spoke a need to ask how I came to be who and where I am."

How many members of the Vietnam-era generation, veterans and dissenters alike, have needed to explain who they are, and why? The epistolary form Mr. Smith has chosen, while it undercuts some of the drama, does serve the story he has to tell: a story that fully invokes the confusion, and the loss, of that time in our history.

The writing in Mr. Smith's collection is strong, not showy, and demonstrates a good eye for original detail. The ability of humans to lose their way has never been much in doubt; the stories in *Letters from the Horse Latitudes* document that phenomenon convincingly.

But just as important, the stories seem to provide some hope that, once lost, we can get our bearings again, and go on to find our way.

Lynna Williams, winner of a Dobie Paisano Fellowship for 1994, is currently living on J. Frank Dobie's ranch in the Hill Country.

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