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SOUTHWEST TALES

Short stories informed with verve and sympathy

Letters from the Horse Latitudes

C.W. Smith
Short fiction
TCU Press, \$19.95

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FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

One of the pleasures of reading is discovering a new author, someone who writes with talent and verve and who is able to create some of those truly rare literary moments when the reader is absolutely lost in the richness of a story.

So if you weren't aware of him before, do yourself a favor and meet C.W. Smith, a professor of English at Southern Methodist University whose new short-story collection, *Letters From the Horse Latitudes*, is wonderful enough to meet the most exacting reader standards. Smith's ability to climb inside the minds of his characters is exceptional; there are no one-dimensional cutouts to be found. No one is perfect, no one is quite satisfied, no conclusion is the end of anything other than some of life's ongoing episodes. And that's the magic here — instead of laboring to force unmistakable *important themes* on his readers, Smith just wants us to climb aboard with his quirky cast of characters and see if we can't learn a little something from their experiences.

Letters from the Horse Latitudes comprises both period and regional pieces. The 11 stories

all take place between the 1920s and '90s, and most are set in the American Southwest, with a few forays across the border into Mexico. Though the information isn't provided on the dust jacket, Smith must be native to those areas, because otherwise he simply couldn't have concocted such wonderful, authentic denizens for them. From Waylan Kneu, a somewhat disreputable leaser of jukeboxes in a small New Mexico town, to Carmen, a maid-turned-jealous-harpie in Mexico, all the author's creations ring true.



C.W. Smith

This isn't to say each of the near-dozen tales is equally fine; any collection has some stories that are better than others. "Tickler," the opening tale, will be everyone's favorite, a bittersweet childhood memoir chronicling a boy's first exposure to adult marital and sexual tension. Unexpectedly given the gift of a condom — the legendary "French tickler" at that — by Kneu, the juvenile narrator muses that "having the French tickler was like being given a souvenir to a World Wonder that I had not been to but had long been yearning to visit."

"Domestic Help" is painfully funny; a 30ish American woman discovers to her great grief that U.S. mores don't play well south of the Texas-Mexico line.

"The Man With Unusual Luck," another fictional Mexican excursion, is even better, a lingering look at the effect of fortune on individual fate.

Occasionally, Smith commits the very pardonable sin of overwriting; "Hugo Molder and the Symbol of Displaced Persons *Everywhere*" gets too convoluted. *Plane* tips its punches in advance.

But it's the title story that symbolizes everything W.C. Smith does so well: "Letters From the Horse Latitudes," a fictional missive from son to father, is an absolute wonder. Often parents and children are emotionally separated from each other precisely because they have traits in common, and anyone who's ever felt estranged from other family members will be mesmerized by this tale.

It's too much to expect that *Letters From the Horse Latitudes* will top any bestseller lists; it's a collection written by a relatively unknown author and published by a small university press.

But it's good, very good, and you should ask the staff of your favorite bookstore to special order it if necessary.

JEFF GUINN is associate books editor
of the Star-Telegram.

PEOPLE OF LETTERS

Czeslaw Milosz shows us a slice of his life