

# Border Stories

*A first collection of tales  
set in Texas and Mexico.*

## LETTERS FROM THE HORSE LATITUDES

Short Fiction.

By C. W. Smith.

205 pp. Fort Worth:

Texas Christian University

Press. \$19.95.

By Benjamin Cheever

“**M**AGELLAN, pursued by the Spanish armada, 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, and so he escaped from the armada, whose captains never thought to look there. But in the meantime, he won the contempt and wrath of the captains and crew of every vessel under his command.”

This passage is at the center of the title story of C. W. Smith's first collection, “Letters From the Horse Latitudes.” But its message spreads throughout the book. The characters in these handsome tales are navigating treacherous moral shoals. Like Magellan's, their blind, uncertain gropings often excite the contempt of others.

Set in Mexico and the American Southwest, Mr. Smith's stories have a rugged informality. Their sense of intimacy is so great that the reader feels he has uncovered a cache of personal letters or is overhearing a late-night conversation between friends. And yet, like the stories of O. Henry, each is cleverly contrived to capture some essence of life and also to make a point. Today most O. Henry stories read like antiques, dependent for their effects on credulous readers and illuminated with false optimism. But the world that Mr. Smith dramatizes is both contemporary and convincing.

In “The Plantation Club,” two white teen-agers who have been encouraged by a black jazz musician are caught with the marijuana he has given them. The police ask them to turn in their

friend, but they resist: “Stoogie was a poverty-stricken musician who'd paid heavy dues and who could play alto in a way that could make your heart sing! He wasn't a dope peddler! Was he?” This is a moral tale, but it is not told by a moral simpleton. All the characters are three-dimensional, even the sheriff who browbeats the narrator and his friend.

Benjamin Cheever's most recent novel is “The Partisan.”

In the title story, a deserter writes to his father about the brutality he witnessed and was party to in Marine boot camp. Mr. Smith's precision of observation, which in this case makes an old story new, is also cause for humor in other stories. Take, for example, this description of a young woman in “Tickler”:

“We heard how Noreen had grewed up in Fort Smith, Arkansas, moved to Big Spring when she was in grammar school, was Queen of the Howard County Rodeo when she was 16 — still got the clippings and she'll show us some time? — then she left school to work at the air base in Abilene, got married to and divorced from an airman all in one month, went to beauty school but couldn't stand the stink. Now she lives in a trailer park with a cocker spaniel named Bobo and

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cat named Mitsy, loves Coors . . . and can't stand Mexican food because it looks like something the dog already ate.”

Unfortunately, not all of the 11 stories in the collection are quite up to snuff. “Witnesses,” which is only four pages long, is also slight in other ways. “Child Guidance,” about an American couple in Mexico, ends on a single simple note that belies the complexity of what's gone before.

C. W. Smith has published four novels and one book of nonfiction. Clearly the intention of this assortment of his shorter work is to entertain and instruct, but in the process realism has not been sacrificed. In fact, what's most real about his characters is their common state: not goodness or wickedness, but an air of yearning and bewilderment. □