Review of Thin Men of Haddam by C.W. Smith in Best Sellers

Best Sellers

Smith, C. W. Thin Men of Haddam
Grossmon. Jon. 16, 1974. 327p. $7.95. |IJ

Surely one of the most gratifying experiences of good reading is its ability to bring us into contact with people, with cultures not our immediate own. C. W. Smith, in this splendid first novel, offers us this kind of reward. In a land which boasts of equality under the law, it is important for us to feel something of its gross inequality. Lately we have come to recognize something of our treatment of blacks. In our Southwest comes the growing militancy of the chicanos. Cesar Chavez is one apostle; this novel with its enigmatic title taken from the verse of Wallace Stevens can be another.

Like so many human encounters it is a story of survival in a world made cruel by man's selfishness, cloaked by ignorance which can be culpable. For the Chicano, language barriers add another obstacle. So the novelist allows us to sit with Mendez, intelligent without education and deeply feeling, as he is treated by our modern bureaucracy. How to fill out those forms and answer questions so that a man can work and earn his dignity? His stomach is empty and growling, his anger boiling like lava. It's a scene most of us readers have not known and we must work to experience as much as we can.

And there are the others who sell their souls for the Anglo: anything to hold a job so that wife and family can be supported with the necessary. And there are the basic drives of all men: sexuality, need for love and success. The white man does not come over very happily. The novelist must pick and choose. One hopes that in these pages one does not have to reflect on most whites; one continues to dream that there are plenty of exceptions to this kind of exploitation.

Meanwhile read this book and enjoy its language and its feel for a section of the Southwest which continues to be rich in its people. You will enjoy a wide range of interesting characters. The style allows for boredom with the boring and life with the pulsating rhythms of a great people who need a chance to breathe. It says much for humanity that it continues to be warm and loving despite the greed of so many. Recommended. (73-7187)

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