



LEONARD SANDERS

Four *Novels Choice* Fare

New novels by three prolific pros—Jack Bickham, David Westheimer and Brian Garfield—and a stunning first effort by a native Texan, C. W. Smith, are among choice releases from the spring fiction lists.

Smith's novel, "Thin Men of Haddam" (Grossman Publishers, \$7.95) is perhaps the most auspicious debut for a Southwest writer since Larry McMurtry's "Horseman, Pass By." Smith does more than tell a good story; he delves deep into the inner, hidden conflicts of his characters. His wealth of talent is evident and even more impressive is his firm use of a surprising range of narrative skills.

The story centers on Raphael Mendez, a West Texas ranch foreman. Orphaned early in life, he was reared by an Anglo family. Angry, moody, brooding, Mendez lives in a nether world, neither de la raza nor Anglo. He is sensitive to the strong resentments he encounters among his less fortunate cousins. Yet, he is unable to accept in good conscience the benefits that have come his way. His wife, Juanita, rails against his inner torment: "Why does every moment of life have to be a struggle for you?" she asks at one point. "You're impenetrable. Your walls are constant. Everyone is your enemy."

While Mendez broods, his sidekick and lone ranch hand, Bond, rambles verbally over the landscape of his mind. Bond's inane monologues in West Texas twang consume a large portion of the book. His intrusion on the early portion of the story is as irritating as the West Texas wind. But when Bond falls silent, the reader misses him immensely. In good-hearted, well-intentioned, inept Bond, Smith has created one of the most memorable characters in Southwest fiction.

When one of Mendez' cousins — a militant — lands in trouble and becomes the object of a manhunt, Mendez is powerless to avoid his own tragedy. The story's conclusion borders on contrivance, yet Smith manages to make the final scenes effective.

A West Texan, Smith attended North Texas State University in Denton and received his MA. at Northern Illinois University. He currently is an English instructor at Southwest Missouri State University,