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'Understanding Women'

By C.W. Smith

TCU Press, \$24.50

While "Understanding Women" may sound like just another relationship manual, the title is intentionally misleading. C.W. Smith, a Texas native, delivers a charming coming-of-age tale set in the mid-'50s against a backdrop of political and social upheaval.

The protagonist of this novel, Jimbo Proctor, is a 16-year-old boy on the brink of manhood. The summer before his senior year, Jimbo leaves Texas to stay with his Uncle Waylan and Aunt



Vicky in New Mexico. Eager to be initiated into the world of real men, he plans to work for his uncle's oil drilling company alongside a crew of braggarts and roughnecks. His crossing the border from one state to the next is more than geographical. He is crossing the threshold into adulthood.

Jimbo soon realizes that this transition is not going to be as smooth as he'd hoped. Uncle Waylan is caught in an emotional tug of war between Vicky, his wife, and Sharon, his mistress. Jimbo ends up acting as a reluctant go-between in his uncle's affairs. Meanwhile, he also struggles to come to terms with his own budding sexuality. While Waylan simply wants to find "an understanding woman," Jimbo longs to understand women.

The story is enjoyable in large part because of its simplicity and straightforward approach to the narrative. Despite its simplicity, the novel touches on complex emotional issues. Smith gracefully traces Jimbo's transition from The Hardy Boys to Kerouac, from Elvis to jazz, and from innocence to experience. Jimbo's personal evolution reflects the more general social evolution in America in the mid-'50s.

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