

★**Smith, C. W.** *Understanding Women*. Sept. 1998. 345p.  
Texas Christian Univ.; dist. by Texas A & M Univ.,  
\$24.50 (0-87565-189-5).

The double meaning of the title unfolds in a novel of remarkable sweetness about the year James (aka Jimbo) turns 16. It's 1956, and his Dallas parents let him spend the summer in New Mexico, working oil rigs with his uncle Waylan. Waylan is a boy's dream: a profane, hard-drinking hombre with too many women in his life and in his head. His current wife, James' aunt Vicky, is a smart, sassy schoolteacher who has thrown Waylan out for messing with (and hiring) an old girlfriend named Sharon, who comes with her cousin Trudy, a college woman who reads Kerouac and enchants Jimbo. What's inside Jimbo's head makes for compulsive and delicious reading. He watches his uncle and his fellow workers for clues as to what makes a man, and he obsesses, with extraordinary innocence, over all the different women in this story and their relationship to him and to his uncle. Sweat and drink, smoking and cussing, sex talk and sex dreams and sex stories—all that boy stuff is articulated beautifully, as is Jimbo's growing sense of women as actual people. More than that, the intoxication of first lust is beautifully rendered, and it is hard not to be touched by Jimbo's lush delineation of Trudy's body, as where he compares her female parts to rose petals. A subplot that involves Aunt Trudy's protests against book banning carries through to an oddly tacked-on coda, where we rush forward to the present without quite learning what James has become. Wonderful reading. —*GraceAnne A. DeCandido*

**YAM:** *Teens will adore Jimbo's awkward obsession with lust and its consequences and will identify with his naive belief that only he can set things right. GAD.*

**9/1/98 BOOKLIST—UNCORRECTED PROOF**