

A coming-of-age tale in New Mexico oil fields

Understanding Women

By C.W. Smith
(Texas Christian University
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By Donley Watt

In the summer of '56, James "Jimbo" Proctor escapes from his careful and conventional North Dallas home to spend his vacation working the oil fields near Hedorville, N.M., in the loosey-goosey care of his Uncle Waylan Kneu.



In this delightful novel by C.W. Smith, Jimbo is 16, his hormones boinking and bouncing and shifting into overdrive every time he encounters a woman. For women fascinate Jimbo, and he speculates endlessly about

their secrets and motives and strategies and mysterious sexuality.

Aunt Vicky is Uncle Waylan's new wife, a transplanted Baltimore schoolteacher with "class." Waylan's previous women were guilty of "drinking beer straight from the cans, smoking cigarettes on the street . . . and not knowing any better than to put . . . a bottle of catsup on the dining table."

Waylan proclaims that though all his previous partners have been "understanding women," "he'd gotten a good one this go-round."

Trouble is, once Jimbo rides the Grey-

hound out to Hedorville, Aunt Vicky has turned out to be undeniably good but not quite so understanding. For Waylan has hired Sharon, his old girlfriend from Dumas, Texas, as his new secretary. Sharon has what Jimbo labels an air of "provocative freedom," and Aunt Vicky has banished Waylan to the bunk room back of his office, where the young Jimbo joins him, immersed in the triangle Waylan has created.

And here the writer, with energetic and imaginative prose, creates Jimbo's new world — the small-town, Tex-New Mex oil-patch culture of cigarettes and cold beer and backbreaking labor. The roughnecks — Lefty, Red, Rabbit and Cotton — give Jimbo an education of an alternative sort, breaking him in to a man's world of work and cussing and conquests.

At Runt and Dot's Cafe, Jimbo meets Sharon's cousin, Trudy, a bright, brash red-head waitressing there for her summer break from college. Despite their age difference, he and Trudy pair off and before too long explore territory that both had only fantasized about.

But Trudy stirs more in Jimbo than horniness; she introduces him to her bible, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Earlier, Aunt Vicky had pushed *Lolita* on the boy, both women determined to enlarge his world.

This literary sidetrack leads into an odd subplot embroiling Aunt Vicky and a reluctant Jimbo in picketing the town's library, protesting Baptist threats of censorship. From here the Red Scare of the '50s intertwines with the Waylan-Sharon-Vicky triangle, both layered with the inexhaustible ruminations, speculations and infatuations of the love-struck, world-puzzled Jimbo.

Understanding Women is an engaging story of a boy's trip from innocence to experience, woven by a richly gifted writer.

Writer Donley Watt lives in San Antonio.

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