

Knowing Generations

Understanding Women by C.W. Smith. (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1998. 345 pp. \$24.95 cloth)

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And the winner of the 1998 Texas Institute of Letters Jesse Jones Award for Best Work of Fiction is...C.W. Smith's *Understanding Women*. Smith's book was something of a dark horse, no doubt, a university press-published book up against such strong novels as *Where the Sea Used to Be* by Rick Bass and *Newfangled* by Debra Monroe, which were finalists for the award and which were published and promoted by major New York houses. And as Smith acknowledged in his acceptance speech, he had won the award once before, for *Thin Men of Haddam* in 1974. Smith also noted that when he won that first award, he would have never thought he might write a coming-of-age book, but as he matured, he looked upon initiation stories differently.

Indeed, *Understanding Women* is an initiation story, but it is clearly one told by a mature writer who has gotten beyond the simple coming-of-age story; he can spin out that story slowly and with the wisdom that comes with time. It is the summer of 1956 when sixteen-year-old Jimbo leaves his Dallas home and journeys to Hedorville, New Mexico, to work for his Uncle Waylon's oilfield roustabout service. Unlike Jimbo's settled father, Uncle Waylon is a wanderer. His first marriage having failed, Waylon lives with his new wife, Vicky, a progressive Easterner come west to teach school.

Vicky is one of the many women young Jimbo tries to understand during the course of the long, hot summer, and she is also one of the women who offer their understanding to the young initiate as he struggles with the complications of life. Vicky introduces Jimbo to '50s radicalism, defending Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, organizing a protest against local Baptists' attempt to ban books such as *Peyton Place* from the town library, introducing him to haiku and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*.

Jimbo has a hard time understanding how Vicky can be taken with his Uncle Waylon, rounder and roustabout, who likes fast cars, wears boots, and listens to country music. Waylon seems more likely to be attracted to Sharon, his blond secretary. In fact, Jimbo soon learns that Sharon is Waylon's girlfriend, and the marriage is in trouble. Sharon has come from Dumas, Texas, to live in the motel with her cousin, Trudy, so she can be close to Waylon.

Trudy attracts Jimbo's interest; she's older and available and is another young woman who offers

understanding. She's a true representative of the '50s as she listens to Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie and reads Jack Kerouac. When Sharon gets pregnant, Trudy enlists Jimbo to help her perform a crude abortion on her cousin, a truly sobering experience in the sixteen-year-old's quest to understand women.

The violence of the abortion is one of several types of violence Jimbo encounters. There are accidents, one of them deadly, in the hot, hard work in the oilfields, and there is emotional violence associated with Aunt Vicky's protests, Easterner/outsider role, and deteriorating marriage.

These are the surface elements of the story. Looming behind is the generation of the '50s, and the novel is compelling because of the reality of those details—H-bomb tests in Bimini; Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver's loss to Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon; the increasing popularity of Elvis Presley; Marilyn Monroe's marriage to Arthur Miller; John Ford's *The Searchers'* underlying racial theme; the growing beatnik work that would lead to the hip world of the '60s. Smith leads readers into an understanding of a generation by presenting the details of the time casually, incrementally, allowing the times to speak through the youthful Jimbo who struggles to understand his place in it.

Smith eases the era into the story, always keeping readers' eyes and ears on the narrative through seemingly casual but deft descriptions:

We were sent to shovel a sludge of oil-drenched sand out of the bottom of a holding tank we entered through a blob-lined hatchway, and when I punctured the muck with the point of my shovel and shoved it in to get a bit, the stuff clung like taffy and made a nasty wet smack when I heaved up a glob...Our boots soaked up goo the color of cockroaches.

Smith's narrator is looking back four decades, so he can reflect on these events from a position of knowledge and wisdom. He, like Smith, had waited long enough so that he could tell the story with grace and affection. The skillful storytelling is complemented by Barbara Whitehead's beautiful design and dustjacket, making the whole package an aesthetic delight.

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