

# Coming of Age in the Texas Fifties

*C.W. Smith Recalls an American Era*

BY CLAY REYNOLDS

*UNDERSTANDING WOMEN.*

By C. W. Smith.

TCU Press.

345 pages. \$24.50.

It's the summer of 1956, and sixteen-year-old James Robert Proctor's quiet, middle-class Dallas home plays host to his mother's brother, Waylan, and Waylan's new bride and second wife. Vicki, a Baltimore-bred schoolteacher, seems to be the complete opposite of the rake and rambling Waylan. But the couple's visit excites the imagination of the teenaged James. He sees his oil-company-owning uncle as the apotheosis of manhood and virility, and the sweet Vicki as a living breathing example of mature, female sexuality. Together, they present to him the perfect portrait of American possibilities for the post-war generation: brawn and bravado combined with brains and beauty. The opportunities for prosperity and pursuit of happiness seem boundless. So when Waylan proposes that James ("Jimbo") come out to Hederville, New Mexico, and work the summer as a roustabout, everyone — especially Jimbo — agrees that such a manly experience would be good for the boy.

For Jimbo (now in his fifties, a candid narrator recalling his past), it is a golden opportunity. He will have the chance to develop "Charles Atlas" muscles in a world of men, surrounded by desert wilderness and hot metal. Moreover, he can return with sufficient funds to buy a car and experiences unthinkable in sedate and flabbily urban Dallas. Jimbo packs up his untapped hormones and boards a Greyhound, bound for the testosterone-tinted sunset, expecting a wonderful and adventurous summer with his Uncle Waylan and his beautiful Aunt Vicki.

Predictably, things go wrong from the start. Jimbo arrives to learn that Vicki has banished Waylan from home, and he and Jimbo take up residence in the dirty, steamy back room of the welding shop.

Jimbo is confused and discommoded by this downturn in his expectations, but soon discovers the origin of his relatives' marital discord: the curvaceous Sharon, a twenty-year-old blonde from Dumas, whose inept clerical abilities do not diminish the pure sexuality she exudes, emerging from the shop's front office in her tight toreador pants and low-cut blouse. Jimbo's libido goes into overdrive while he worries that his parents will learn of his uncle's domestic problems and order him home. To his shock, his aunt encourages him to equivocate, and he takes his first babystep toward manhood: he lies to his parents. But he has little time to contemplate his guilt, as he is rapidly thrown into the bake-oven toil of his job and the fishbowl life of an oil-patch town in the middle of nowhere.

From this point, the novel eases into the white heat of New Mexican desert summer. Jimbo becomes acquainted with the hard work of the oil field while he learns the facts of life from his maverick uncle and a colorful cast of redneck roughnecks. As the youngster tries to sort out precisely what is going on between Waylan and Sharon — he cannot accept the obvious until he's absolutely confronted with it — he finds himself also drawn into Vicki's confidence. She excites his mind more than his fantasies, stuffs him with food, and challenges him to read such mind-changing books as *Lolita*. She also begins to educate him about civil liberties, persuading him to join her protest against the library's banning of books (*Peyton Place*, for example) that might be offensive to the firmly Protestant community. Soon Jimbo's focus is less on her shapely legs and more on her words and wisdom.

Jimbo is instead smitten by Sharon's roommate and friend, Trudy, an earthy, buxom, red-headed college sophomore at West Texas State. This bright woman tempts his lust with her full figure, chocolate eyes, and tangled red mane, but she also feeds his mind with notions of Jack Kerouac and beatniks on the road. The re-

sult is the inevitable heartache of a first romance, and the angst that gives way first to anger, then to understanding, as Jimbo begins to realize what it truly means to become a man.

From such a synopsis, one might gather that *Understanding Women* is merely another bittersweet *bildungsroman* about the painful replacement of innocence with experience, one boy's discovery of physical manhood and intellectual possibilities. In fact, the novel is more fully a Texas perspective on the awakening of the sensibilities of an entire generation, one that would soon shed its quiet identity on the louder stages of the multiple movements of the sixties: free speech, civil rights, women's liberation, and ultimately, anti-war, anti-establishment activism. More than the story of Jimbo's rite of passage into adulthood, Smith's tale portrays the embryonic emergence of what would later be called the "counter-culture": that nascent movement that had as much to do with "sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll" as it did with a true awakening of social consciousness. Brilliantly executed, *Understanding Women* takes as its surface theme the bewildering discovery that women of all ages and walks of life have a special mystery that defies male comprehension. This is hardly a new or astounding revelation, but through Jimbo's sensibilities, the reader is treated to an almost constant barrage of confusing signals, amusing behavior, and terrifying uncertainty about what to expect from these most alluring and mystifying creatures.

In one way, the preoccupation suggested by its title exposes the novel's only serious flaw. Often, Jimbo possesses awareness and interpretative abilities far beyond his tender teenaged years. While it's clear that he's telling the story from the perspective of a much older man, many of his reactions and insights seem to be flavored more by the experience of age than by adolescent precociousness. Additionally, he's often

inconsistent in his presumed education. He's never heard, for example, of "Endymion" or the Gordian Knot, but he is instantly alert to Freudian implications and is sensitive to subtle personality traits that would seem to require a more mature sensibility. It's also a touch difficult to believe that a college student with Trudy's maturity and wisdom would become so enamoured of a high school kid that she would offer him her virginity — or even a quick tumble in the front seat of a pickup — in exchange for his heart.

Such quibbles aside, however, Smith deftly moves the reader through Jimbo's summer of manly rituals: his first real lie to his parents is quickly followed by his first cigarette, his first beer (and his first real drunk), his first poker game, and of course, his first sexual experience. From that moment, the story delves into the complexities of the gender wars, as Jimbo tries to find his way through the labyrinth of emotions surrounding Sharon, Waylan, and Vicki, and, by extension himself, Trudy, and a hapless roustabout named Cotton (Jimbo's rival and, as it turns out, his only friend). Finally, Jimbo is confronted with larger and more dangerous issues than jealousy or adultery. He is forced to confront the life-sized terrors facing those who refuse to follow conventional rules: those of art and literature, or those presumed to apply to the complex relations between men and women.

Now middle-aged, James tells his story in an attempt to understand the vital and continuing importance of that formative summer. The raw purity of the emotions and experiences of that time and place in American history, he infers, made him what he became. In a larger and extended sense, it made his generation what it became, as well. It is perhaps an accident of our times that so many Baby Boomers are casting their minds and imaginations back to a period before intense social awareness disturbed the "quiet generation" of the fifties, and turned them on to the social activism of the sixties. In novels such as *Understanding Women*, as well as in some recent films (e.g., Gary Ross' *Pleasantville*), a sense of nostalgia combines with the tension of looking backwards: seeking a false complacency that must have existed in the silence before the storm. The sweetness of innocence, illusory though it may have

been, was as necessary to that generation as it was impossible to articulate.

The fifties were, as Smith demonstrates, a watershed time, when admiration for the power of a V-8 engine was matched by the imagined horror of The Bomb; when men were men, women were women; when virtually everyone considered important was white and afraid of Reds. Smith recreates an era when heroes such as Ike and Adlai were as important as Elvis and Ed Sullivan, when beats and pinkos were the bad guys, at least to "Tail-gunner" Joe McCarthy. Questions about the future were still only half-formed fears and whispered expectations — a time of innocence, to be sure, but as Smith's novel illustrates, also a time of experience.

Vicki, Smith's heroine, represents the proto-sixties activist, an emerging feminist. Sensitive to persecution based on free expression, race, and gender, she teaches her nephew the value of commitment — but she also illustrates the cost of conviction when she takes a stand against well established and primitive stupidity. Yet Smith astutely keeps Vicki firmly rooted in a feminine — not yet feminist — mentality, a sensibility of the era before bra-burnings, legalized abortions, and the ill-fated Equal Rights Amendment. As a result, Waylan comes to embody for Jimbo all the negatives of masculine pride and arrogance, as the boy observes the horrible pain that insensitivity and selfishness can cause. It's not a new lesson, he understands, but one that each generation must learn for itself in its own painful way. In Trudy and Sharon, Smith offers two examples of emerging female archetypes: one enters the world of activism and social consciousness; the other fades tragically into the urban obscurity of a counter-culture in search of self-identity.

As with most everything Charlie Smith has written, the novel offers this peek into the past with uncommon grace and artistic charm. His chosen theme — young people pitting their personal integrity against expected social rituals — recurs in his writing, most especially in several of the stories of *Letters from the Horse Latitudes: Short Fiction* (1994). The notions of unrequited love and struggles between the genders also informs *Country Music* (1975), set in the same remote New Mexican oil-patch town. But that novel's protagonist, Bobby Joe, full of anger and frustration, seeks a

self he never quite discovers. In *Understanding Women*, Smith writes from the apparently more comfortable perspective of older age. Humor and irony play heavier roles than rage and grief, and in the final analysis, the result of the process is wisdom rather than wit. Charlie Smith's ingenious talent is well displayed in this funny, sexy, and astute evaluation of something we all have in common: our youth. □

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