

THE VESTAL VIRGIN ROOM, by C.W. Smith. 248 pp. Atheneum. \$13.95.

You've seen the likes of Don and Dottie Baxter before. They're the couple in the hotel lounge playing "Feelings," smiling too much and making feeble jokes with the sparse audience as they silently total up the \$7.25 in a tip jar on the piano. All the while, they are quietly assuring themselves they're too good for this.

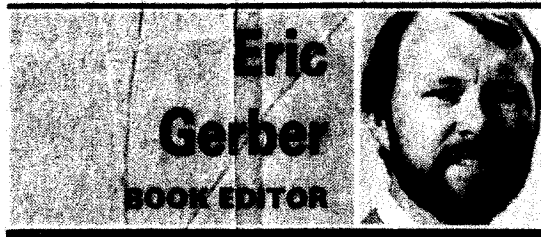
The sad truth is that they're not.

They're third-rate entertainers who keep playing these third-rate gigs in the hopes that their big break is just around the corner of the next Holiday Inn's Stardust Room.

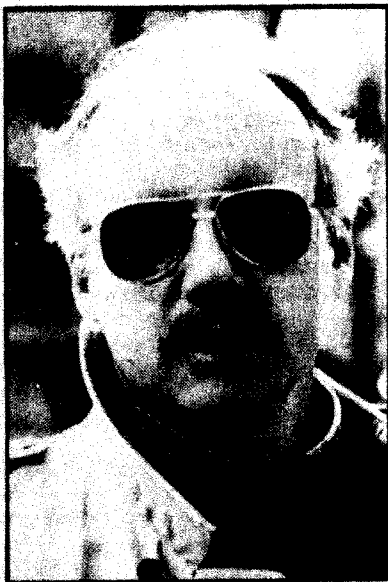
Dallas writer C.W. Smith's new novel, *The Vestal Virgin Room*, is a simple, sympathetic and, at times, remarkably sweet tribute to Don and Dottie Baxter, the love they have for each other and their sincere belief that there's no business like show business. In the hands of an ironist like Bruce J. Friedman, this story would have

been mean-spirited and hilarious. In the hands of a serious, introspective novelist, it would have been sodden and pretentious. In the hands of Smith, best known for his 1973 novel *The Thin Man of Haddam*, it is played at the proper tempo and tone, snappy and superficial. If the result sounds a little bit like literary Muzak at times, that's pleasantly appropriate considering the subject matter.

Don and Dottie, who met in college and have been making beauti-



ful music together ever since, are working their way from St. Louis, their home base, to Las Vegas and their big break. They're signed for a one-night, New Year's Eve performance in the Vestal Virgin Room of the Tropicasa Hotel. There will be an important agent in the audience. If they make a good impression, who knows?



C.W. SMITH:
Sincere

More Vegas dates, a few gigs in Atlantic City, maybe a talent scout from *The Tonight Show*...

But you sense from the opening pages that Don, on drums, and Dottie, on piano, are only fooling themselves and, Vegas or not, the Vestal Virgin Room is going to be just one more lounge filled with

drunks, hecklers and bored people sending up boring requests on cocktail napkins. No more Vegas dates, no Atlantic City and no *Tonight Show*. What concerns us is how Don and Dottie, who are certainly likable if not particularly talented people, will hold up to this?

Smith falters, I think, when he saddles them with an unavoidably melodramatic Secret Sorrow (a young daughter who died an accidental death). And Smith plays fast and loose with the characters' intelligence and taste. How can they, on the one hand, decide to perform such vapid, simple-minded schlock and, offstage, be the type people who listen to Keith Jarrett and read Anne Tyler?

But those sour notes fade into the background. The main theme of *The Vestal Virgin Room* — facing your limitations and not allowing them to cheat you out of happiness — rings out loud and true. Add in Smith's entertaining riffs about the ins and outs of show business on the lower levels and you've got a quick, clever and, above all else, refreshingly affectionate novel. And after you've read it, I doubt that you'll ever watch another Don and Dottie act in a hotel lounge with quite the same smug attitude.)