

## Death haunts characters of 'Vestal Virgin Room'

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contributing reviewer

The Vestal Virgin Room, by C.W. Smith (248 pages; Atheneum; \$13.95)

**W**hat's the worst thing that could happen to you? It's a morbid question, but that doesn't stop anyone from asking it. For parents, it may be the death of a child.

A dead child is what haunts Don and Dottie Baxter, the main characters of C.W. Smith's fine novel *The Vestal Virgin Room*. Don and Dottie are small-time entertainers, the sort who spend their lives in hotel lounges playing their hearts out to bored businessmen and drunk, belligerent locals.

Small-time entertainers usually manage to believe, even when there is good reason not to, that they will make it to the big time one day. Don and Dottie are no exception, and their big break is just a few miles down the road—it's a New Year's Eve gig at the Vestal Virgin Room in Las Vegas.

As entertainers, they are ordinary enough; their comedy routines are corny and the songs they sing are other people's hits. But as a couple, Don and Dottie are exceptional. They've been more than spouses over the years; they've been buddies.

Unlike most married people, they have managed to go on appreciating the best in each other and accepting, with good grace, the worst. They still work at pleasing each other. On Christmas Eve, for instance, Don decorates their motel room with a real tree, lights, and candles as a surprise for Dottie.

Perhaps the only thing they have loved more than each other is their daughter, Amy, who has been dead for several years. As they drive from one hotel to the



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next, her ghost travels with them. So strong is her presence that she might as well be sitting in the back seat, alternately pulling her parents closer together and then shoving them apart.

Don and Dottie have conflicting ideas on how to shake loose and begin their lives again: Don wants to make it big in show business, and for him the test will come at the Vestal Virgin Room; Dottie wants to throw away her birth control pills and have another baby before her biological clock runs down. Clearly, a crisis is near.

Don and Dottie don't have all the answers, of course, but they do have something to teach. At one point, Don considers the "horrid cruelty" of losing a child and how his loss is "not an isolated example" but "a thread running through the universe." Readers can hope that if the worst that can happen ever becomes a reality for them, they will face it with the strength and dignity of these two memorable characters.