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Don and Dottie Achieve Fame

"THE VESTAL VIRGIN
ROOM," by C.W. Smith
(*Athenaeum*, 256 pp.,
\$13.95).

Reviewed by Ruth Peltason

Don and Dottie Baxter seem about as middle-class and clean as a bar of Dove soap. For instance, when Dottie mentions wanting a "Lady Di do," Don thinks to himself, "Her own blond hair is fine; it's parted in the middle and brushed up on both sides with a little ski-tip curl an inch or so above her shoulders . . . This style evolved from a do she got when that ice skater, I forget her name, sent everybody scampering to their hairdressers."

C. W. Smith, whose earlier novels, "Thin Men of Haddam" and "Country Music," were praised by critics, takes us on an odyssey stretching from the conservative Midwest to Las Vegas with a surprisingly moving blend of satire, compassion, debauchery and pathos.

Smith moves easily in this world of Herculon couches, meals at McDonald's and coked-up showgirls. Indeed, his obvious pleasure in chronicling the minutiae of Americana is the perfect foil for his more serious inquiry into marriage and family life.

Don and Dottie live in an unpretentious St. Louis suburb; he runs a drum shop and she works part-time at the local library. Their passion, though, is music, and for the past 12 years they have been playing their second-rate husband-and-wife musical act at a string of so-so places: Holiday Inns, country clubs and Ozark resorts, weddings and whatever. Sometimes Don drinks too much and gets wired on

speed which makes his comedy number particularly menacing, and Dottie, whose corn-fed figure is squeezed into a dress that looks like some high school prom relic, warbles off-key when she gets nervous.

But what they lack in style they make up in earnestness, and for years they have been hoping for a chance to "make it." Finally, they're offered a plum: an act in the Vestal Virgin Room at the Tropicasa Hotel in Las Vegas on New Year's Eve. It's only a 15-minute spot between main attractions, but no matter; for Don and Dottie it means stardom, and so they shore up their hopes, pack the car and head west.

The trip, with its attendant dreams, however, is a pressure neither of them is strong enough to handle. Here Smith most skillfully juxtaposes the present (the drive west) and a point in time three years earlier when the Baxters' little girl, Amy, died: "Sorrow rises in me, a clay fist in my gut. I see I'll have to endure one of those days when I can't get Amy off my mind."

By the time the two arrive in Las Vegas, they're shell-shocked and shaky. Worse still, Dottie has begun to realize that for Don their Vegas act means more than their marriage. After the big moment arrives and their gig is more torment than success, Dottie, brave soul that she is, leaves Don to work out for himself, at last, how much pain — and truth — he can face.

As Smith deftly alternates the point-of-view between Don and Dottie, he makes us understand that for all their Bachrach songs and schmaltz, there is a humanness and spirit in them much allied with our own. Although Don and Dottie can be tiring, and there are places in the story where the pacing is uneven, Smith keeps steady control; humor and tragedy are as much in harmony here as Don and Dottie's singing duets.

Ruth Peltason is a free-lance reviewer.