The eighth novel by C. W. Smith, *Purple Hearts*, emerges with a fictional power reminiscent of the best of his earlier novels—particularly *Thin Men of Haddam*. Although it lacks the more careful craft of *Buffalo Nickel*, it tracks some new ground for the award-winning SMU professor and clearly shows the kind of workmanship and level of narrative power for which Smith is best known.

Setting the novel in 1943 in Port Farview, Texas, Smith undertakes to offer a picture of the World War II era in a busy war-industry-dominated port city. Port Farview is, of course, Beaumont, something few pains are taken to disguise, as references to actual locales, Hotel Dieu, the main city hospital in the era, and to the local newspaper, *The Enterprise*, are familiarly offered. Readers who know Beaumont will recognize Smith’s cannily accurate geography, including his bracketing the city with Kountze to the north and Port Arthur to the south.

The novel follows the lives of four principal characters, starting with Georgie Karacek, an epileptic and weak-kneed, pudgy, mama’s boy and heir apparent to his deceased father’s considerable estate. Georgie proves his manhood, in a sense, and rebels against his domineering mother, in a sense, by joining the army; but he conceals his disease. When it’s discovered, he is unceremoniously discharged and sent home. Georgie’s foil is Robert Goforth, a handsome and initially likeable oil company worker, who, following his rejection from military service owing to a polio-lamed leg, moves to the Gulf Coast from his East Coast home. A noble-minded and self-effacingly honest fellow, Robert leaves behind an upper-class girlfriend who jilted him and, he hopes, the incessant need to explain his 4-F status.

Tying the two characters together is Sylvia, Georgie’s new bride, a slightly chubby girl with a checkered past who Georgie married, to some extent, as part of his rebellion against his mother and partly because this attractive, sensuous woman entirely captures his libido. Sylvia is an earthy woman with ambitions to be a professional singer and actress. She’s no gold-digger but sincerely seems to love her husband; still, Georgie’s inability to stand up to his harridan of a mother frustrates her, and during his brief absence in the military, she has “needs.”

Georgie returns, they wrestle with their animal attraction for one another and try to maintain something like decorum. Georgie, in the meantime, gradually becomes aware of Robert’s threat, undermining his trust in Sylvia.

The *Madison County*-style plot moves into the summer of 1943 and takes a complex turn. Robert, who moves out of the house, dates a variety of loose women, but can’t shake his obsession for Sylvia. Sylvia, inexorably drawn to Robert, tries to make herself love Georgie and presses him to stand up to his mother. Mary Kay, whose popularity wanes as the family peccadilloes become obvious to her high school chums, stumbles along, ultimately taking work in a drug store, where she is eyed by the predatory owner.

As the story evolves, slipping neatly from one major characters’ point of view to another, tension mounts with the temperature. Tempers and passions flair, and the discomforting undercurrent of insecurity fuels the whole. Smith’s close eye for detail provides a meticulously full background and setting, with references to products and popular culture phenomena that evoke a colorful portrait of the time and place.

Smith also manages a fictionalized version of the racial issues that simmered in Beaumont and finally exploded into a riot that summer. The catalyst was a white woman’s claim that she was raped by a black man. There were hundreds of arrests and two deaths, including that of the alleged rapist, who was shot and killed. Rather than focusing on the violence and mayhem that saw hundreds of buildings ransacked and burned, Smith places the riot into the background, using the chaos and fear it engendered as an opportunity to show his characters at both their best and their worst as events swirl around them.

Problems with the novel are few, but they are somewhat telling. Smith’s ear for period dialogue is excellent with only a rare anachronistic intrusion. From time to time narrative gaffs do occur—“wound tighter than a barbed-wire fence,” or “she looked like a woman who had just given birth and didn’t enjoy a moment of it,” or his confusion of a color guard for an honor guard. Such mistakes contribute to an unfinished quality to the book, a feeling that the story fades away rather than concludes. This creates a nice sense of verisimilitude, but it also makes for a less-than-satisfying ending.

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of contents of whatever we’ll call a canon these days for Texas writers, for Western writers, for all writers who tap keys alone while everybody else watches American Idol. Let’s get some enchiladas at Rogelio’s later, we’ll bring our books and I’ll show you all the damn fine examples. Shrade’s book makes me wonder if we shouldn’t rather be spending the time we spend writing cleverish reviews working on our own stories and novels.

If I have one complaint about the book (and we’re supposed to—remember Book Reviewin’ 101?), it’s that there’s a single line missing. Though two other sections of Blessed McGill grace the pages of Land of the Permanent Wave, I’m partial to the scene that has narrator Peter Hermano McGill alongside Quahadi Commanches on a buffalo hunt. As the stoic animals are picked off one by one by an upwind McGill, the beasts begin to smell the dead around them, and McGill sums it all up with: “I say all creatures are fascinated by the presence of much blood and many deaths. We get in a spell over the death stink.” That last line ought to be included in any Shrade reader. Don’t you wish you could write a line like that, one that’s lofty and low-down simultaneously? Complaining about the line’s exclusion is silly perhaps. The easiest form of criticism of these kinds of books is to take issue over what should have been left out and passages that should have been put in.

I’ve got a simple solution, though. I went ahead and wrote the “death-stink” line inside the front cover of my copy. I figure that next time when things get hard and I have to go sell all my books at the used bookstore, I owe it to the book’s future readers to make sure they get the whole picture.

Chad Hammett teaches at Texas State and writes his own novels.

Go Fish!, continued from page 4

depend on our ability to identify and locate them, determine their needs, and ensure that sufficient water is left in our rivers, streams, and aquifers to sustain them.”

Freshwater Fishes of Texas sports a practical water resistant cover, a crisp and attractive page layout, detailed photographs, and strong organization that contribute to its ease of use. The authors make it easy for an expert or amateur to identify a fish based on morphological features, simple measurements, and fin counts or by simply matching it with the color photos. Additionally, the guide documents the tremendous biotic diversity of Texas’ water systems. For anyone who is interested in learning more about Texas freshwater fishes, this book is essential for your library. Though I bet it will find its way into your tackle box or glove compartment, as it did in my case.

Henry Lyle III is an angler, amateur naturalist, and anthropologist. He is a former assistant editor for TBR.

War and Remembrance, continued from page 19

The biggest complaint, though, is that the war just isn’t part of the book. There are numerous references to men in uniform, to rationing coupons, gasoline and sugar shortages, the USO, war industry work, and the oft-repeated phrase, “There’s a war on,” as an excuse for any lack of anything. There’s even one military funeral. But the military progress of the Allies in Europe or the Pacific is almost never mentioned. During a time when most homes had a map on the wall with pins placed to designate battles and campaigns, when virtually every household tuned in nightly to hear the war news with Walter Winchell and other reporters broadcasting from overseas, when newspapers and posters and reminders of the war were everywhere, these characters never express any interest or curiosity about the world conflagration. To them, the war is an inconvenience that tends to make things uncertain, not a horrific struggle against evil empires that threaten their way of life.

It may be that this is a deliberate omission, a kind of off-hand comment on the blasé attitude contemporary Americans express about the horrible violence of distant war. A hint that this may be so is the reproduction of a variety of period magazine ads at the start of sections, oft-times ludicrous in the effort of some companies to use propagandistic bromides to sell products. Even here, the war isn’t always present. Perhaps the most absurd of these—to modern eyes—would be a soap company’s consolation of a young bride who is being ignored by her new husband. They advise a lathery cure for body odor that will fulfill all her romantic cravings.

But such distractions and a few caveats seem picayune in the shade of Smith’s demonstrated power to delve deeply into the psychology and deeper motivations of these highly complex characters. As he moves smoothly from point of view to point of view, he maintains a taut and increasing pressure among them that always threatens to spill over into violent outbursts. His understanding of human emotional reaction, even to the smallest gesture or comment, to the nature of human failing, is profound and complete. In almost every chapter there is one scene that leaves the reader squirming uncomfortably with empathy for these people and their nearly impossible situations that are, ultimately, of their own making.

In the final analysis, Purple Hearts provides a well-done and complex romance, but it is no formula piece. As the characters develop, the challenges presented to them become more and more difficult to deal with, and there are no easy answers available. As a study in personalities during a time and place of the not-so-distant past, the novel succeeds in giving us a glimpse into the human heart at both its best and its worst.

Novelist Clay Reynolds is associate professor of aesthetics at the University of Texas at Dallas. His recent works are Of Snakes and Sex and Playing in the Rain and Sandhill County Lines.