

Larry Baker

an excerpt of

*“If I Do My Job Right”: Harry Crews and His Readers**

I’ve never met Harry Crews, but I’m pretty sure he would hate the following question: Will Harry Crews be remembered for the stories *about* him or the stories *by* him? To me the answer seems obvious, but it may not be so for others. Crews is one of those writers whose work has its own corner in an overcrowded room with a southern exposure, not intruded upon even by the likes of Faulkner or O’Connor, who themselves have their own corners. Most of the other writers are forced to scramble for space in what’s left of that room.

Harry Crews is a southern writer, but so are countless others. Remove the regional pigeonhole, though, and Crews is a brilliant writer, and there aren’t a lot of those. His brilliance is not just a matter of style or subject matter, but also of *effect*, of making the reader remember. Crews knows what is important: “Listen, there are novels that are so personal that I just close the thing, mark it with my thumb, and look out the window to keep from crying. There are novels where I just can’t bear . . . just can’t bear the thing that only a god would ask you, the burden of it.”

Life always goes on, but a good story is like a brake. You slow down, perhaps you stop, so you can enjoy the scenery. Right about now, I can imagine the voices of people from my past, those with whom I talked about Crews. “Sure, Larry, we slow down. But reading Crews is like slowing down to go past a car wreck. Prurient interest in death and dismemberment, blood on the goddam tracks.”

A *Booklist* review of Crews’s most recent novel, *An American Family*, is probably typical of how most reviewers approach him now: “Crews’s latest

testosterone-fueled trance of cryptic meaning and freakish violence . . .”—and so it goes. I read a line like that and I’m reminded of what happens early in a political campaign. The media requires a narrative about the candidates, something that explains them and that all subsequent statements and actions have to be made to fit if they are to be included in the coverage. In 2000, Gore was branded the serial exaggerator and condescending smart guy; Bush was the laid-back but genuine guy you’d like to have a beer with, forgiven for his foibles because he seemed to lack the pretensions of Gore. Hear it enough, you don’t have to think anymore. You don’t need to think at all. Harry Crews’s “narrative” is doomed to be a gush of pyrotechnic *cojones* prose in a Bosch or Diane Arbus Confederate landscape. Unless you read him, and you slow down, and you’re willing to be imprinted.

I never wanted to be well-rounded, and I do not admire well-rounded people nor their work. So far as I can see, nothing good in the world has ever been done by well-rounded people. The good work is done by people with jagged, broken edges, because those edges cut things and leave an imprint, a design.

—Harry Crews