
an excerpt of

“A Writer’s Face”: *The Letters of Harry Crews**

With commentary by Douglas Carlson

The collection of Harry Crews’s correspondence in the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Georgia contains a mix of ordinary writer’s business enlivened by occasional glimpses into an extraordinary career and personality. Although Crews apparently saved few copies of his own mailings, numerous letters from editors, agents, friends, and fans disclose some of the tumult, joy, and despair of a man whose entire being has been consumed by writing.

Crews’s own letters make the conflation of Crews the writer and Crews the person abundantly clear, and they say, “I am large, I contain multitudes.” Revealed is the self-described badass—vulgar and aggressive and with a taste for the blood of dogfights and brawling—who generously supported young writers and closed compassionate letters to his friends with “Think love and joy.” He could go on at length about complex reasons for his choice of images, yet insist—as he did in the foreword to *Classic Crews: A Harry Crews Reader* (1993)—that all he did was simply tell stories about people “doing the best they can with what they’ve got to do with, sometimes acting with honor, sometimes not, sometimes with love and compassion and mercy, and sometimes

*Letters reprinted here are from the Harry Crews Collection, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia. Excerpts from Andrew Lytle’s letters are used by permission of the Andrew Lytle Papers, Special Collections, Vanderbilt University. These transcriptions remain true to the spirit of the originals, though we have silently corrected the occasional inconsequential error. Handwritten signatures are indicated with italics.

not.” Unable to hide his distaste for the nuances of the academic and publishing worlds, he presents himself as a south Georgia storyteller possessed of an unsettling probity and a native talent for hard work. In a world where art and “real” life often contradict, he is the carny with the death’s-head and the closing lines of e. e. cummings’ “Buffalo Bill’s” tattooed on his arm.

Personality matters. A writer lives and works according to a code, as a 1970 letter inviting a protégé to apply for an assistantship at the University of Florida reveals:

I don’t have any interest in “helping” people. I don’t have any interest in “straightening anybody out.” . . . What a man does with his own life is his own business.

If you come up here, it means that you will have to accept and meet the discipline of a straight, middle class, orthodox, third-rate Graduate English Program of a State University. If you don’t intend to do that, don’t accept the graduate assistantship (providing it’s offered).

Next point: if you are to be around me much, you must not search my actions for hidden motives or antagonisms. The most offensive word I know is: Why? Most of the time I don’t know why I do what I do, much less explaining it to other people. When somebody asks me if I want to do something, I say yes or no. And that’s as far as I want to go with it.

The same must be said of a true character, a realistic scene, or the honest ending of a novel.