

Harry Crews is a stomp-down hard-core moralist

By Steve Oney

It was all of two o'clock on a sultry Thursday afternoon and Harry Crews was poured into a corner booth at an ersatz nautical bar in Gainesville, Fla., called the Winnjammer. Bits of sailing rigging were scattered about. The place was as dark as the hold of an East European freighter. Light from a flickering wall lamp played upon Crews' face, and there was a shock in seeing him, discernably electric, as if he were stripped of psychic insulation: stripped like a badly wounded animal that has retreated to its lair. "The craziness is in me," he was growling. "I'm self-destructive. Masochistic." He was slouched into the booth, and one of his legs, crippled from childhood polio, hung limply to the floor. Crews' large, brutal torso, fitted into a decaying mauve sweat-shirt, coiled lazily. His viper-like skull with eyes set an inch back into the brow was turning on a thick snake's neck, a neck resplendent in a silver and turquoise necklace. "My private life is a shambles." The voice was almost indiscernable, lost



In repose, the essential Harry Crews.

in a glass of Scotch and milk he was draining. "I get into trouble. I can't cope. I louse things up, wreck cars, lose money. But a fictional world... I can make it do whatever I can't do with my own life."

Here at the Winnjammer, Crews was fighting to gain control of himself. He had just endured a long, soporific drive back to Gainesville from Ashburn, Ga., where his mother was ill with appendicitis. He was trying to pull his mind together before going home to finish writing a magazine article about jockeys for *Sport*. Facing him at 7 p.m. was the initial meeting of a quarterly fiction-writing class he teaches at the University of Florida. And in the back of his mind, hanging like a cerebral millstone, was the thought of the work he still needed to do on his first nonfiction book, "A Biography of A Place." Scheduled for release in the fall, "A Biography of A Place" is to be a dissection of past and present in Bacon County, Ga., Crews' birthplace. It will be his ninth book, and it follows a string of novels that began appearing yearly in 1968, when "The Gospel Singer" was published. Whether the new book will come from what could be called Crews' world — in the same way that Yoknapatawpha County is called William Faulkner's world — is difficult to divine. For one thing, it is difficult to understand Crews' fictional world. He doesn't understand it completely. A line which Flannery O'Connor wrote about her own work hints at the substance of Crews' writing, though: "It is in the extremities of evil circumstance that the possibilities of grace are more nearly perceived."

"Oh man, man, I feel like I'm

gonna die. My mama just worries, worries, worries. I had to go up there to do what I had to do because a son has got to do what he feels he's got to do." A second Scotch and milk was in Crews' hands. "I may die though. Damn drive."

Crews backed up from the thought of his demise and lit a Marlboro. "I ain't gonna die, but damn if I don't feel like it. Bring me another of the same, and less milk," he called to the barmaid.

HARRY Crews' eight novels abound with the extremities of evil circumstance, the products of evil circumstance. There is Joe Lon Mackey, protagonist of Crews' most recent novel, "A Feast of Snakes," a novel set in Mystic, Ga., at the time of the town's annual rattlesnake roundup. Joe Lon is a college-caliber football player who is left with nowhere to play because of poor high school grades. Joe Lon rechannels the brutality his high school football coach taught him to cultivate by blowing away a number of acquaintances with well-aimed shotgun blasts.

Then, there is the Gospel Singer (in the novel of the same name), a golden sheep born from the fold of a depraved white trash family in Enigma, Ga. The Gospel Singer has a honeyed voice that has allowed him to escape the insularity of Enigma. He returns to sing at one last tent revival and ends up being hung from a tree. The people of Enigma perceive that the Gospel Singer is a charlatan and set him free by the noose.

And appearing in almost all of Crews' books are midgets, people without legs, Continued on page 30

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the deaf and the dumb. And there are crowds in all of his novels — milling, destroying, running awry with that violent sense of freedom one finds in a large group where he is guaranteed anonymity.

Crews was miffed at certain critics who call him a Southern gothic writer. "Strange thing, maybe," he gurgled, slowly recovering from the drive. He looked up from his drink and squinted at the wall lamp. "I'm not a product of William Faulkner. Graham Greene has influenced me more than any other writer." His voice was at once filled with jazz and south Georgia. "People are always talking to me about being a Southern novelist, about being out of the Southern tradition and all of that crap. All I can say to them is yes, I lived in the South all of my life, practically. . . I was born and raised in Bacon County. But I don't think of myself as a Southern writer. I don't think any novelist of any consequence wants an adjective in front of the word novelist. You don't want to be, ah . . . I don't know, gothic novelist or a black humor novelist. You just want to be a novelist. It's true that a writer is told by a lot of stupid people like English teachers to write about what you know. But that's bull. You write about murder and you never killed anybody. You write about a woman, and you haven't been a woman and on and on and on. What English teachers mean or what I hope they mean. . . and they probably don't mean it. . . but what they should mean is that to write and write well, you

have to be on incredibly intimate terms with the manners of a people, the culture of a part of the country. And I have lived in the South. . . well, almost all of my life."

Crews tipped the glass up over his massive nose and drained it. "I'm splitting."

Writers like Harry Crews always run the risk or create the risk of being mythicized, of being enshrouded in a mystique re-

It's a fact that Crews is an easy target for literary potshooters. He's received his share of plaudits, but a rumor that has reached minor mythic proportions holds that Harry Crews is nuts; that he writes about nuts; that his work is gratuitous, rife with uncalled for violence and perversity; that he sits at his 1929 Underwood typewriter in his stultifying stucco house in Gainesville and busies himself in creating even more gratuitous scenarios to be test-mar-

'I don't think any novelist wants an adjective in front of the word novelist'

plete with its own parables. Already, certain caretakers of literature have consigned Crews to a place that one writer said was underneath a dark root of the Southern literary tradition. But what that really means is difficult to discern. Because Crews writes about people who on the face of it are freaks and evil interlopers — Jean Stafford once called his bailiwick "an Hieronymus Bosch landscape in Dixie" — it is probable that critics can't get around the abnormal, gut-wrenching fireworks that are always going off in a Crews novel. "Obsession, violent, grotesque, gratuitous, bizarre, macabre, harrowing, wild." Critics are fond of labeling Crews' fiction with these words. "I don't even read that crap anymore," Crews will bellow. "It's too hard to write, and if you read enough reviews, you'll flip and lose your confidence. It does happen."

keted for the freak-reading public. Even his friends promote the rumor. Playboy, for which Crews writes frequently, once labeled him its "resident weirdo." Esquire, for which Crews writes a monthly column called "Grits," packages the column with a logo that looks like the peeling skin of the comic book character Hulk. And if stumbling through a bookstore one happens to find a paperback edition of one of his eight novels, those potato chips of writing known as excerptable blurbs which appear on their jackets will reaffirm the story: "obsession, violent, grotesque, bizarre, macabre, harrowing, wild"; all the words except the one which Harry Crews detests, gratuitous.

Aside from the bizarre fictional population which Crews gives critics to ponder, there are the hard facts of his own life, the facts that have led some to accuse him of being



Jed Smock holds forth near Crews' office.

drunk on machismo. Already this year, he has been forced into an out-of-court settlement with a man whom he says, "leaned on me too hard, just wouldn't let me out of there without going back to the parking lot and then, what could I do? When it's gotten that far, there's nothing to do but go on with it." Anyway, Crews ended up breaking the man's hip in the brawl behind a Miami bar. And there have been other incidents. He was thrown in jail in St. Augustine after a ruckus at an establishment known as the Slip Disk Disco. While in Tulsa, Okla., working on an Esquire story about the sexual life of evangelist Billy Ray Hargis, Crews took up for a Tex-Mex whom he felt was being wronged by an immigration agent in a pool hall and was subsequently jailed. Because of his life-style, Crews feels critics attack him without considering the merit of his work.

JED Smock was gyrating like a drunken top on a worn spot of grass in a quadrangle outside Crews' office in the University of Florida Fine arts building, an aging

gothic edifice. Smock, an evangelist who interprets the impending doom of the Old Testament with considerable embellishment from his own febrile imagination ("Do you think those people on the two 747s that collided in the Canary Islands knew they were going to die? Did they know Jesus? Will you know Jesus if you are called tonight, if time runs out tonight?"), considers the student body of the university to be his personal flock. Friday morning, and Crews was ensconced behind his office desk, already well into a third large styrofoam cup of Krispy Kreme coffee. The previous night had been taxing. It began with a two-hour lecture to his fiction class and ended with a drop-in friend sleeping in his living room, curled up with a stun gun for protection from an amorphous, never clearly defined danger. Crews was pulling at his scalp, slurping coffee and smoking; stoking himself and his nerves. Outside, Smock was telling a group of Krishna Consciousness people that they and their saffron robes would burn eternally.

"I don't know, God, I don't know." Crews was musing.

"One of the things that writers live with is the terror — fear — that they're not going to be able to write a book. And if you write one, you're scared that you're not going to be able to write another one or that if you do write it, it's going to be terrible. And writers who are truly writers, that's about all they got to live for. It's what keeps them together. It gives them something to hold onto. This playwright who wrote 'Picnic,' Los Angeles guy. I've forgotten his name. Anyway, he killed himself because he couldn't get any work anymore."

Crews drained the cup of coffee and grunted. "I think precisely what people mistake in me as being macho. . . that thing in me that wants to get as far on the edge as I can of anything that I can, the thing: I like to call getting naked. . . is my need to keep myself going as a writer. You can't find out about a thing. . . well, you can find out about a thing vicariously, and you can find out a thing from a book, but you can't find about it as well as you can when you're naked and vulnerable to the experiences of the world.

"And that's the only reason that I can live more or less in a university community and still not write academic novels. I go out into the world and do whatever I do. Now people can just say what they want to say. I don't think anybody who's ever met me or known me for any length of time, intimately, would say that I go out and do these things, this machismo stuff. I'm just out there, and if you're out there long enough, things happen to you. And then you write about them.

"But there is a cost. There is. My gig is to get naked, but guys make me out as a brawler and a drunk, and sure, I howl sometimes, just like anybody, I howl.

"But what I wonder about are things like when I went into this bar last week and a guy I don't know from Adam asks me about the time I was out at the Blue Pine and got in a fight with a cue stick with some guys. . . I say to this character, 'That never happened, man. How do you think I get my work done, huh?' That's the thing they don't realize. People think I'm always lying in some gutter someplace, sleeping something

or other off. . . and there are times I am. . . but not that often. I try to take reasonably good care of my talent; I figure I'm just hitting my stride. A good writer ought to be able to get 22, 24, 25 books in a career. And after all, no matter what anyone says, we're all just trying to get through this thing, trying to have something to do until we die."

CREWS has indeed paid a stiff price. He began writing fiction about the models in the Sears and Roebuck catalog when he was five years old. ("Those models were always perfect and my life, my home life was pretty awful.") Crews managed to talk his way into the Marine Corps at age 17 in spite of his polio-ridden leg. He stayed there three years and left to enroll at the University of Florida where he studied fiction writing under Andrew Lytle. Crews calls him his one great teacher. Lytle had been a member of the Vanderbilt University fugitive group of writers which included Robert Penn Warren and John Crowe Ransom.

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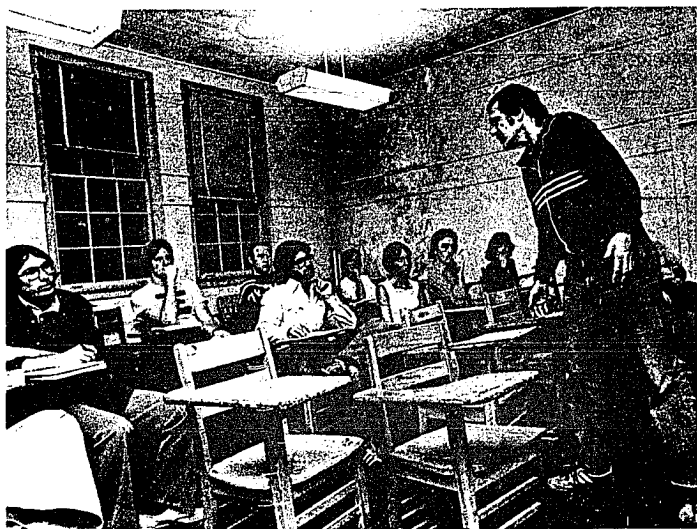
Crews left the university, he took an unlikely job as a seventh grade English teacher at a junior high school in Jacksonville. It was 1962. There, living with his young wife and a son who would later drown, Crews made his most important investment into learning how to write.

"I wrote a novel that year. What I did was take Graham Green's book, 'The End of The Affair,' and I reduced that damn thing to numbers." Crews had already gone out for another cup of coffee, and he spilled it on his desk with a sweeping punch from his right fist. "Nerves, pure nerves. Anyway, I knew how many characters he had, how much time was in the book — present time and past time and the time of memory and of flashback, all of it. I found out how many cities were in the book and how many buildings and how many rooms in the buildings and how many transitions. And then I pinpointed the climaxes in the

didn't matter. Because of that year, I knew how it was done, and I went on from there."

It was getting near 10 a.m., and Crews was in need of alcoholic sustenance. The Gainesville bars opened at 11, so he limped out from his office to make the drive to his ex-wife's house for a couple of vodka and tonics. Pulling himself into his silver van, Crews jammed Randy Newman's "Good Old Boys" tape into an eight-track player and pulled out onto the blistering macadam of the highway. Driving loosened him, as if it worked the coffee out of his system.

"Yeah, it's very difficult for me to talk about it. It's very difficult for me to intellectualize on all the work I've done, although it's easy enough to do about the work someone else has done." Crews was humming along with the tape which was into a



Crews lectures his fiction-writing class.

novel, where action turned, found what pages they were on. I read that book until it was dog-eared and was coming apart in my hands.

"And then. . . I said I'm gonna write a damn novel with the same number of scenes and on and on and on as are in 'The End of The Affair.' I knew I was going to waste a year — but it wasn't a waste — and I knew the end result was going to be a mechanical, unreadable novel. But I was trying to find out how you do it. I wrote it. . . and it ended up being the piece of crap I knew it would be.

"I mean, I ate that damn Greene book, literally ate it. And after I wrote mine, I didn't let anybody read it but Mr. Lytle and he gave it back to me and said, 'Well son. . .' He was a hard taskmaster. But it

song about Huey Long, "Kingfish."

"For instance, people have written that there is a midget in my first three novels, and when I gave a copy of my third one ("This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven") to my ex-wife, Sally, she said, 'You don't, do you, intend to make a career out of midgets?' And that was the first time it ever occurred to me that there were midgets in my first three books. There was Jefferson Davis Munroe in 'This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven' and Foot in 'The Gospel Singer' and Jester in 'Naked In Garden Hills.'

"This thing I'm writing for Sport about Jockeys. I was down in the jockey room at this race track working on it, looking at all them little people and they don't walk, they tick, like a

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watch. They're fine. And I say in the piece that they are perfect of their kind. They are the absolute essence of what is needed to do what they do, which is ride thoroughbreds."

CREWS wheeled the van off one of Gainesville's main drags and onto a quiet, shady street. "There are these guys," and he spat the words, "who say I write gratuitously about freaks. Some guy at the Atlanta papers wrote a review of 'The Gospel Singer,' and I wonder about that guy, who he is, if he's ever written anything himself. He wrote just an awful review of the book . . . saying such things as this guy is an awful writer; you'll never hear from

him again; he'll never write another book.

"Anyway, there's a guy who has his head on wrong. Some writers never get over that kind of criticism. I'm not saying this to be self-serving, but to be a writer and to sustain yourself for a long period of time, you need raw courage. You have to say to the world . . .ok. . .say what you want about me, do whatever you want to do to me. And I'm still gonna write and I'm gonna write the way I want to write and I'm not gonna write books to satisfy you.

"And if they're gonna say I gratuitously write about freaks and violence, let them go ahead and say it. I have a helluva lot of compassion and sympathy for those people who, as I said about Foot in

'The Gospel Singer,' are special under God or special people."

The van had pulled to a halt in a driveway leading to a ranch house. "See, I can walk around and I'm not going to get any static. People will look at me and no one is struck by how ruined I am. I can think dreadful things, have dreadful notions in my mind and no one is going to know. But a guy who is three feet tall is going to have to deal with being three feet tall every day. And everytime he turns a corner, he looks at a guy and he sees his own predicament in that guy's eyes.

"To write about one thing you have to talk about another thing, and that's the whole nature of fiction and poetry. You can say more about what the world out there calls normal by dealing with what the world calls

abnormal. This is what I do.

"The reading public bothers me though. They don't want to read about the blood and bones and guts of an issue. They want to read about something they're not going to have to think about, and if it does hurt them, as say 'Love Story' does, it won't last very long. What has happened in this country is a failure of the imagination."

Crews eased himself down out of the van and began fumbling around with his key-chain for a house key. He pushed a black beret he was wearing back on his head and shuffled over to a brick enclosure in front of his wife's house where he keeps his dog, Brutus, a massive, black mastiff. "I write out of this kind of outrage," he was saying. "And to write about the violence and the stuff I write about, you've got to be angry. . . . People wouldn't

understand it if I said I was a moralist. They'd think I was some academic dude holed up with a bunch of facts and books and didn't live in the real world. But to write out of my kind of outrage, you've got to be a stomp-down hard-core moralist."

Crews was teasing the dog now, growling at him, and the vision of Crews and the dog conjured up a scene from "The Gospel Singer" where a character named Didymus contemplates throwing himself to a massive dog.

And Didymus said, "Go into strange lands where people have never heard of you and tell them things they do not want to hear and cannot understand. If you are lucky, they will kill you and eat you. . . or throw you to vicious dogs. That is the way to God, righteousness and the moral life." □