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JOE

By Larry Brown

Algonquin

Since newly-retired Louis D. Rubin, Jr. founded it in 1982, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill has proven a devoted champion of Southern literature in America. Yet, each year Algonquin's Shannon Ravenel (Larry Brown's editor), in her Introduction to the prize anthology annual, *New Stories from the South*, struggles with limited success to explain the elusive qualities that make a story Southern (my favorite definition remains Pat Conroy's mother's: "All Southern literature comes from one basic story—'On the night the hogs ate Willie, Momma died when she heard what Daddy did with Sister'.").

Few recent novels savor of Deep South soil as poignantly as Larry Brown's second novel *Joe*. Its setting, characters and sensuality carry echoes of Faulkner but lack his nod to history and labyrinthine sentences. Here, the plastic, neon and interstates of contemporary America never obtrude on the raw struggle of daily life.

Son of a Mississippi sharecropper, Brown knows this parched land well: "The field bordering the road lay baking beneath a white sun, pale green rows of little plants that merged far away. The earth seemed to be smoking and it had no color, so dry it was, as if it had never known rain. It seemed dead as old bones." Folks lie to, shoot at and maim people here. For sport, they watch pit bulls tear each other apart. On quiet days, they sit around eating Moon Pies and drinking RC.

But not the parasitic, repugnant Wade Jones, whose own daughter snaps, "I hate your guts and I wish you'd die." He sits around drinking booze and rolling cigarettes, surrounding by his impoverished family whom he has herded from Texas to hole up in an abandoned shack and harvest garbage dumpsters. He and his bovine brood are Faulkner's Snopeses all over again, right down to the redemptive son, Gary, 15, with visions of a better life carved from hard labor.

Joe Ransom provides the labor. Gary can work on Joe's crew killing scrawny trees so a lumber company can replace them with pines fit for lumber. As Gary struggles to keep his earnings from being stolen by his father, Joe finds a paternal affection growing for the boy. Joe's a survivor. A 43 year-old divorced ex-con and boxing champ, Joe has much to teach. But Joe's compassionate heart is criss-crossed by a self-destructive pattern of reflexive behaviors watered by alcohol and finding outlet, as likely as not, in his fists and guns. When Joe and Gary find Wade Jones prostituting Gary's 12 year-old mute sister for \$30, Joe is more prone to act from his instincts than his better judgment, and his days of helping the boy may end.

Brown's vivid prose recreates the elemental lives of central Mississippi with stunning intensity. He brings us up close to his characters' dialogue, their fighting and

sexuality and oases of tenderness. Already acclaimed for his recent story collections *Facing the Music* and *Big Bad Love* and the powerful antiwar novel *Dirty Work*, this lusty new book carves a secure place for him among the most hard-hitting of contemporary writers.