

Boston Globe 2001

BILLY RAY'S FARM

By Larry Brown

Algonquin. 216 pp.

Something in us cringes when we see a memoir or collection of personal essays published by a writer whose fiction we admire. This seems particularly true when it's an author known for laconic masculine prose. We fear he might, like Rick Bass, tell us more than we wish to know or, as in Larry Brown's new group of essays, often tell us less.

Which is not to say this book doesn't contain of wealth of material well worth our time. The best parts of this quilt mix of appreciation, travail and experimentation rise to becoming art, though some pieces fail to rise above vacuity.

The title comes from a farm that "does not yet exist on an earthly plane," but rather is something Brown's son Billy Ray possesses as "a vision of his imagination so far, and I have no idea of the form it will ultimately take in real life." Brown devotes many pages to his and Billy Ray's laboring on that farm, though, including the entire first and last essay.

This dream farm becomes a metaphor for Brown's career and concerns. Some people, say a Muhammad Ali, are lucky enough to be able to create themselves. Some people watch others, then pass them through the creative filter of their imagination to devise anew their nature and their history. These people become writers.

Writers grow thick on Brown's home soil of Oxford, Mississippi, which gave us Barry Hannah, John Grisham and, hovering over them all, William Faulkner. And, like men creating the perfect farm, they all had to put in long, hard work. Training the imagination to create the interesting and artistic takes years filled with discouragement and frequent failure, so Brown is particularly appreciative of those mentor writer figures who've inspired and encouraged him.

The legendary wild man of Florida letters, Harry Crews, gets an entire essay of celebration here for the time he devoted to Brown in the apprentice years, listening sympathizing, just showing it is possible to endure the painful beginning of this solitary and often thankless trade. So too do the writers Brown met at a Chattanooga writers' conference, including Earnest Gaines, William Styron and that most compassionate of all writers, Madison Smartt Bell.

While the writers share with Brown a common professional experience, Brown suggests an even deeper debt, because earlier in his life, to those men who filled the void left when Brown's father died suddenly in 1968. Those surrogate fathers initiated young Brown into the world of Southern men, passing along their expertise with guns and hunting dogs, showing Brown how to pass this lore on to his own sons.

Part of this Deep South sensibility includes a kinship with the soil itself. Roots grow deep in Mississippi and can reach a love of place for which the Spanish use the term *querencia*. This, in turn, makes more acute those activities which occur on it. When Brown and his son work agonizingly on the site that will become Billy Ray's farm, sawing trees, trying vainly to save calves during arduous births, we sense a poignancy born of the Southern refusal to quit in the face of any hardship. Brown speaks of a fury

born of constant futility--"More than anything I was angry about my boy trying so hard to start a farm of his own and having everything he touched turn to shit," but never does Brown lose his dream.

The best of the place-inspired essays, "Goat Songs," relates Brown's effort to shoot the coyote that one-by-one killed his baby goats. Brown achieves a pacing and descriptive excellence, frequent in his fiction, that otherwise occurs here only in the most experimental piece, "So Much Fish, So Close to Home: An Improv." This larky stream-of-verbiage, reminiscent of T.R. Pearson, bulges with little literary allusions although it appears a simple narrative about the narrator's compulsion to get his share of the horde of catfish about to become available at a local dam.

Other experiments work less effectively, such as Brown's venture into second-person narration in "The Whore in Me." Pulled off perfectly, this riskiest of viewpoints can create the closest possible identification between reader and protagonist. Here, though, unless the reader is a writer from Mississippi, it feels alienating and gimmicky.

It is when Brown is being his most himself, though, that his essays will provoke the most mixed reactions. The finely honed artist in him can adumbrate powerful emotion--his debts to caring people, his pain at losing an animal--but his Mississippi code of reticent expression can also leave us feeling cheated. In "Fishing with Charlie" for example, an epitaph for a blues musician friend who died at 31, Brown's tight lips tell us too little of Charlie Jacobs' life to make us sense Brown's grief or value the life that Brown mourns.

For, though the Oxford soil he sifts makes him perpetually aware of the demigod Faulkner, it is actually a Hemingwayesque understated language of men that Brown writes. It may be praising Brown with faint damnation to note that this language of men boils down to a prose often stripped not of feeling but the need to describe what evokes deep feeling, an understood commonality of values and experience that says, in effect: "If you're my kind of guy, you don't need to be told, and, if you're not, no amount of explanation can help."

The sympathetic reader, then, feels like the protagonist in a Gary Cooper western, reading, then nodding once and saying, "Yup." But how far a step does it then become to simply see Brown's name on a book spine, even if the pages were blank, and just nod and say, "Yup"?

Though most of us as children longed for the Crayola box with all 96 colors, the artist of genius can transmit their most intense vision with at most five tubes of paint. Picasso can draw a woman's back with three lines because he is Picasso and knows exactly what lines to draw. Shakespeare can say more about love and forgiveness with Cordelia's mere "No cause, no cause" than I could relate in a book. Larry Brown, not yet Picasso or Shakespeare, leaves us in places feeling frustrated. In others, though, he moves us and even enchants us.