

Miami Herald Oct. 15, 1995

THE MULCHING OF AMERICA

By Harry Crews

Simon & Schuster. 249 pp.

Like ancient Rome and other empires sinking in moral quicksand, America lusts after convenience. We even worship conveniently. Whatever we wanted to do--enslave Africans, repress women, vilify homosexuals--we found some devil who could quote Scripture to our purposes, proving that ours was God's will. If more convenient, we rewrite Scripture. Thus, the Puritans gave America its attitude toward money. Jesus didn't *really* mean that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God," the Salem witch-specialists declared; what Jesus meant was that wealth was a manifest sign of God's favor.

Clever salesmanship, and so we worship money.

We may at times do it even as nakedly as the employees of Soaps for Life in Harry Crews' potently wry satire, *The Mulching of America*.

In his 25 years going through Miami door-to-door selling Soaps for Life, Hickum Looney has never won the company's annual sales contest. No one has ever outsold The Boss, who wins the contest himself each year just to prove why he's top dog. An odd top dog, to be sure. The diminutive 100-pound Boss snarls through a severe harelip (which makes his dialogue, like Jim's in *Huck Finn*, arduous to navigate) from his 65-room Atlanta mansion to salesmen cowering at remote ends of his teleconferences.

When his chauffeur irritates him, the Boss kicks him ritualistically over his desk. When his masseur annoys him, the Boss beats him with a fraternity paddle. And when Looney tops his single-day sales record, the Boss has him stripped and sent home naked.

In the parking lot the pantsless salesman meets the homeless but far from helpless Gaye Nell Odell and her pit bull Bubba. The pistol-packing karate expert teams up with Looney, and they seek out sweet little Ida Mae Milk, the secret behind Looney's 12 filled order books.

Looney had told Ida Mae that his sample case held "life everlasting" because the company's holy text, the Sales Manual, said, "Pluck the right string...and get a sale," and he'd "known for a long time now that getting mortality into the game could never hurt, no matter what game a man was playing."

Ida Mae not only bought, she took Looney to all her neighbors: "Ida Mae knew where the best batches of dead and dying lived.... When she got up and testified for the product it was like Peter testifying for Jesus."

Although no woman had ever risen higher in the company than clerk, and no woman who wasn't young, blond and blue-eyed had ever been hired, the Boss knows a good thing when she beats his sales record. He offers Ida Mae a job at headquarters.

A throwback to the Roaring Twenties when the business of America was business and a New York ad man named Bruce Barton could write a bestseller (*The Man Nobody Knows*) portraying Jesus as the Great Salesman, the Boss believes Ida Mae resembles his hero, Jesus himself: "Nu couldn't pay a man like Nesus Christ what he was worth. If I had Nesus, I could rule ne world... I'd be bigger nan Wal-Mart and IBM both together. I know in my heart nat Nesus Christ could write more orders nan all my other salesmen put together."

A repulsive blend of Napoleon and Torquemada, the Boss holds the complete allegiance of his employees because he is sanctified by spectacular wealth and fawned upon by the jackals who follow lions to lick up their crumbs.

That means Looney and Gaye Nell must slalom through a South Florida gamut of bizarre hired thugs with names like Slimy and Bickle and Russell Muscle and Pierre LaFarge. It seems, in fact, as if Crews is cruising to the heart of Carl Hiassen country, until he veers off sharply and heads straight for Kafkaland, or perhaps Revelations.

In any case, those who feared from his last novel, *Scar Lover*, that the grim and gritty Gainesville lampoonist was getting soft will find his punch this time savage enough to shake their foundations.