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## SCAR LOVER

By Harry Crews

*Poseidon*

It has been said that living is like licking honey off a thorn. For nearly two and a half decades, few writers have shown us life's thorns more vividly than Harry Crews. His grim tragicomic world of the grotesquely maimed and blatantly brutalized has earned Crews a unique niche in American letters.

Yet, a subtle evolution in Crews' vision over the last few years makes some readers fear the gritty Gainesville novelist may be going soft, finding so much honey that the thorny point has gotten lost. *Scar Lover*, Crews' twelfth novel, certainly won't ease those fears.

Pete Butcher, the "scar lover" of the title, is a Georgia flatlands college drop-out who lives in a Jacksonville boarding house and sweats at a menial job unloading cellophane bales in a boxcar. Pete just goes through the motions of life, without hope, weighted under crushing guilt.

Years earlier, while stapling wire to a post, Pete drew back his claw hammer and inadvertently hit his four year-old brother above the eyes. The accident turned the beloved boy who'd dogged Pete's steps into an institutionalized "something" that soiled itself and mumbled "in a voice and language no one had ever heard." Shortly after, Pete's parents died in a car wreck while trying to get money for the boy's doctors. Pete carries the twin guilt for his brother and parents as indelibly as the twin scars above his brother's eyes: "Never for an instant was he free of them."

Next-door to Pete, pretty young Sarah Leamer also has problems. Her father struggles to care for Sarah's mother, just home from radical breast cancer surgery, and Sarah has a suspicious lump in her own breast. Sarah quickly decides Pete is to become her man, and when Pete gets fired from his job, Sarah's parents take him in.

When Sarah's father suddenly dies, Pete, formerly family-less and riddled with fear of personal attachment, immediately finds himself head of Sarah's family. A cool head is sorely needed there, as Linga, a Rastafarian woman with a scarred face and potent supply of *ganja*, is scheming to steal the Leamers' insurance money. Through his growing love for Sarah and his valiant effort to shield her and her mother from Linga's plot, Pete begins to find the resources for healing his own wounds and rejoining the human community.

As always, the knuckleball flight of Crews' plot can be both disconcerting and refreshingly unpredictable (this is the writer who once dismissed his plotting: "I start with a place and somebody and then I just try to know the story....I don't give a rat's ass where

the novel's going"). His characters, both the benevolent and the malicious, are full of surprises. What may disappoint fans of Crews' early tragic bent is the novel's protracted emphasis on love and redemption. Others, however, will find that turn toward light the logical direction for both this book and for Crews.

"What deep wound did ever heal without a scar?" asked Lord Byron, to whose magnetic unconventionality Crews's own bears kinship. Yet Byron, not Crews, was the real scar lover. Unlike Byron's adolescent reveling in the idea of being scarred, Crews takes a mature and toughminded look at the quest for healing.

While his world has the same quirky freakishness it always has, this is an evolved, nobler Harry Crews. No longer is he the same writer of whom it was said, "Reading Crews is like undergoing major surgery with laughing gas." The laughing gas has been put away. In this novel, where almost every character is deeply scarred, the surgery is over. Now people struggle to face their scars and search for a way to go on.