



Billy Ray's Farm: Essays from a Place Called Tula

Larry Brown

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In "Billy Ray's Farm," Larry Brown brings the appealing blend of candor, humor, and poignancy of his acclaimed novels "Fay" and "Father and Son" to nine personal essays that explore the emotional and physical landscape of the corner of Mississippi he calls home. The centerpiece of this collection offers a moving description of life on his son's cattle farm, capturing Brown's deep-seated attachment to his family and to the land. In other pieces, Brown takes readers inside the writing cabin he built, chronicles his attempt to outsmart a wily coyote intent on killing the farm's baby goats, and reveals his reactions to being constantly compared to William Faulkner, a writer inspired by the same geography. Threaded through each piece are warm reflections on the Southern musicians and authors who influenced his writings. At once entertaining and insightful, "Billy Ray's Farm" brilliantly illuminates how a great writer responds, personally and artistically, to the patch of land he lives on, providing a wonderful look into the mysterious sources of a writer's motivation.

Billy Ray's Farm: Essays from a Place Called Tula Details

Date : Published April 2nd 2002 by Touchstone Books (first published 2001)

ISBN : 9780743225243

Author : Larry Brown

Format : Paperback 224 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, American, Southern, Autobiography, Memoir, Writing, Essays

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From Reader Review Billy Ray's Farm: Essays from a Place Called Tula for online ebook

Richard says

I find it almost therapeutic to return to a Larry Brown book. His writing is so simple, but elegant and much deeper than a surface reading would reveal. This book is a collection of short stories, whose common link is place, specifically his son's farm and Larry's fishing pond and cabin in Tula, MS. He is writing about what he knows and makes it interesting and engaging. It is a snapshot of his and his family's life, a reflection on the process of writing, and above all a celebration of a place and its people, past and present.

Ray says

I began reading Larry Brown's work in the 80's after reading an interview with Harry Crews. There is an essay in this book about their friendship.

Larry writes about a number of gifted authors including Madison Jones, an influence on Crews.

What strikes me most about Larry's writing is how honest, simple and emotional it is.

I spent some time in Oxford MS which is also home to the great Living Blues Magazine and Fat Possum Records. It's like an oasis in Mississippi.

Mark Ewing says

A great look inside the daily life of a man who became an author through hard work. Another great writer who stepped off the mortal coil far too soon.

Daisy says

Collection of essays by the late Larry Brown - probably some of the most beautiful writings about the redneck life ever crafted. I don't think I've ever been as sad as when Brown, writing about his son's inability to make his farm profitable, wrote, 'I can't understand why everything my son touches turns to shit,' after Billy Ray (he of the farm in the title) has a cow die on him while it's trying to give birth. Could one sentence ever capture the modern American south so fully? I think I cried a little after I read it and had to put the book down for a while.

Ann says

The only criticism I have of Larry Brown's "Billy Ray's Farm" is that I wish it was longer. Larry Brown died some years ago at quite a young age and I had to find second hand copies through Amazon--I never intend to sell them. Billy Ray's Farm is a selection of fictional essays although Larry Brown's did have a son named

Billy Ray. As all his books, it is set in rural Mississippi with very true to life people riding around with coolers of beer in the back seat of their cars, going about everyday life but the author has such a unique and tremendous gift of writing just like he was sitting down in your living room telling you this story. You are there with him--part of his story--inexplicable really and I have read and reread his books and each and every time I mourn his untimely death but yet have to say a huge thank you for the legacy he left behind for us to read.

Rogue Reader says

Wanted more of the farm and less of the other. Brown's musings on living in rural America.

Joe Cummings says

A great collection of autobiographical essays (i.e., short stories) about a Southern writer and the challenges of writing as well as being a friend, father and farmer in the modern South. Good stuff! Enjoy.

Robert says

This was a nice quick read. I've had heard about his troubles, his sensitivity to place, the comparisons to Faulkner and I am aware he died young. It turns out much of his work is currently out of print. I have an interest in things agrarian. A collection of essays seemed to be a fine place to get a feel for Larry Brown's writing. It was exactly that. Several of the essays discuss his initiation into the literary world. He discusses with honesty his struggle to find his voice in letters and where he sought mentorship. He also discusses his relationship to the his place which was centered around Oxford Mississippi. I found the essays focussed on his son's farm and his journey building a cabin, by a pond, by hand during stretches of sobriety to be worth the effort to track the book down alone.

This is good writing. His style is direct and conversational. He seems to have an interesting well thought out perspective on his world and life. It left me interested in ordering a novel or two.

Richard says

I have, had, and will continue to have such respect for Larry Brown--first off, that this man quite simply decided to be a writer one day, and from there worked his butt off to make that happen. His tales of writing several novels and over a hundred short stories before he wrote anything that he considered the work of a writer is quite simply archetypal. When there seems to be some concern about the effect of prodigious MFA program on the state and audience of writing, Larry Brown reminded us that it is work ethic, not education, that makes a writer.

Another great aspect of the legend of Larry Brown is the simplicity of his intent and execution. While the critic looks at writing as a mish-mash of symbols and metaphors removed from intent, Brown saw it from the blue-collar perspective--a story about characters who remind us of ourselves. The connections people have

with their environments are direct and substantial--people come from a place, a patch of ground that smells and feels familiar to them; they come from groups of people who help shape them and help them identify who they are.

And it is this last point that this book revolves around. While Brown reminds us in one or two of the essays in this collection of his work ethic in the realm of writing, most of the writing here is about place and the anchor that it provides. We are taken through a tour of blues bars and fishing, of working on a farm and chasing coyotes and helping calves emerge from their mothers and building houses by hand. While some of these essays, for example the tremendously long centerpiece, don't hold a lot of drive to make each page worth turning only after the previous has been soaked up for its every syllable, the simple ethic that speaks volumes is distinctly there.

Of course, there is also the spirit of play that is such a commodity in Brown's work--an essay in second-person about the hardships of a book tour, for example--and this only fuels Brown's pure love for his work. While sometimes I found myself preferring his fiction over his nonfiction, I have been inspired to pick up *The Rabbit Factory* again, or *Joe*, just to touch that flavor of Brown all over again.

Perhaps this book is more enjoyable as an occasional read, something to pick up when between books or between episodes of another book, to let the essays sit separately and resound in the mind on their own rather than read one next to the other and hope for overriding connections to progress and develop, but this is no doubt a good reminder of the pure talent we lost when Larry Brown left us.

Dale says

In the Prologue to this book Larry Brown writes "And I think whatever you write about, you have to know it. Concretely. Absolutely. Realistically." And then he proceeds to write about things he knows about: baby goats and coyotes, Billy Ray's farm, where all that grows is bad luck, building a small house on the perfect spot by the small pond, the prospect of free fish if the spillway is pumped down to be checked for cracks, his mentoring by and friendship with Harry Crews.

In reading Brown previously I've heard him discuss his learning the art, craft, and business of writing over a seven year period in which he wrote about one hundred stories and five novels. In this book he writes

I had learned by then that the price of success for a writer came high, that there were years of a thing called the apprenticeship period, and that nobody could tell you when you'd come to the end of it. You just had to keep writing with blind faith, and hope, and trust in yourself that you would eventually find your way, that the world would one day accept your work.

I enjoy essays very much and am a Larry Brown fan. But I was a little disappointed by this book. No, that's not the way to say it. This book couldn't have been his first book. This is the book that comes *later*, long after the apprenticeship, and after the world has accepted your work. You may have a ritual after a hard day's work. Maybe you watch your favorite TV show, or perhaps sit on the porch and watch the sun fall from the sky, or maybe swirl brandy in a snifter in the library of your house. This is that book, that piece of writing that is your reward, Brown's reward, for a job well done. So while I don't find these essays nearly as perceptive and rewarding as those of, say Tim Kreider, I do feel in them the pairing of his writing and his life at that point, a point where he could slow down, marvel at what was right in front of him, and write about it.

And a note: I love pithy little sayings, many of them coming from the south and particularly people who worked the land there. In "So Much Fish, So Close to Home: An Improv" he remarks of the weather: "It was hot enough to make a cow pee on a flat rock." Huh?

patty says

The chapter "Harry Crews: Mentor and Friend" alone was worth seeking out this book.

4.5 Stars

Shane says

I don't read much nonfiction, not because I don't care for it but because I spend my time reading and writing fiction, learning the craft in part from those who've done it better than I might ever hope to. But this collection of essays--with its talk of book tours and relationships with other writers, specifically Harry Crews, that dirty old bastard who comes off more sweet than anything else here--can teach you a thing or two about community and following your instincts, your internal voice. I wish I had stumbled onto Larry Brown before he died. In some ways it seems too late now and in others, it feels like he isn't going anywhere, ever.

Diann Blakely says

Brown's new nonfiction collection pulls no punches with its reader; moreover, it spares its author nothing. Which isn't to say that this new book will put Brown alongside those memoirists who mistakenly equate their genre with verbal exhibitionism. The title piece and "The Whore in Me" are so tough, so grown-up, and so mercilessly wise that I want to punch in the noses of the lazy-ass reviewers who continue to categorize Brown as "king of the white trash." Labels are cheap; self-knowledge is not. Someone with Brown's phrasing, vocabulary, syntax, heart, and penetrating vision stands at God's right hand, I'm quite sure, and when he asks how I spent my time on this earth—well, I'm rereading parts of this book and getting an answer ready.

Diann Blakely says

In *BILLY RAY'S FARM*, as in *ON FIRE* and Brown's fiction, he pulls no punches with his readers; moreover, *BILLY RAY'S FARM* spares its author nothing. Which isn't to say that this new book will put Brown alongside those memoirists who mistakenly equate their genre with verbal exhibitionism. The title piece and "The Whore in Me" are so tough, so grown-up, and so mercilessly wise that I want to punch in the noses of the lazy-ass reviewers who continue to categorize Brown as "king of the white trash." Labels are cheap; self-knowledge is not. Someone with Brown's phrasing, vocabulary, syntax, heart, and penetrating vision stands at God's right hand, I'm quite sure, and when he asks how I spent my time on this earth—well, I'm rereading parts of this book and getting an answer ready.

Lyn says

My husband is a huge fan of Larry Brown, and I watched the documentary on him, so I was eager to read his work. I don't believe I should've begun with his essays.

It's not that Brown isn't a good essayist in his own right; he's got a unique voice and he shares great details from his eventful life full of bovine and construction dramas, worlds as foreign to me as Navy Seals or coal mining. I think that's what kept me reading, the details of whether this cow would give birth or whether this house he was building would get built. But I can't say the language was particularly rich or that the essay structure was tight. I felt as if the work wasn't really taut, meandering at times, or not particularly interested in finding the right words for the jobs. The first essays in particular had that sense for me.

If the intent was to give a feel of sitting on a porch with Brown and hear a tale that doesn't really have a beginning, middle, and end--just a rambling of facts and occasional reflections--then that goal was achieved. I guess I need my essays sprinkled with more explorations and reflections. I love how Anne Lamott or Elizabeth Gilbert tell their personal stories, so I suppose that sets me up as someone who isn't exactly of the Brown school of essays. I loved Tim McLaurin's *Keeper of the Moon*, I guess because I felt it fed my soul and I got more inside the man. I just didn't get a sense as strongly that I knew Brown; he didn't get to dangerous places in his self mining.

But I did finish, because the book was short enough and Brown, a most interesting man. I will give his fiction a try.
