

# ON FIRE

AN APPRECIATION BY DWIGHT GARNER





**T**he Mississippi-born writer Larry Brown (1951–2004) didn't go to college. Instead, he entered the Marines. When he returned home he drove trucks and forklifts until, in 1973, he joined the fire department in Oxford, Miss. It was a job he would keep for 16 years.

Somewhere along the line he began to compose stories. "Writing was a curveball that I never saw coming," he wrote in *On Fire*, his 1994 memoir. "It's such an improbable and foolish-sounding thing to say in front of anybody: 'I'm going to become a writer. I'm going to learn how to write a book.' But I did tell that to a good friend of mine one day a little over 12 years ago, up in a pasture near a pond we were fishing in, and he didn't laugh."

Brown wrote, on stolen afternoons and on days off, until he became more than merely good. The best of his fiction—the story collections *Facing the Music* (1988) and *Big Bad Love* (1990), the novel *Joe* (1991)—is spare, powerful and doom-haunted, yet streaked with multiple and overlapping forms of grace. Critics have tried to seal his work in a jar labeled "grit lit," but he is not so easily contained.

My favorite book by Brown has long been *On Fire*, the first of his two memoirs. It's one of the finest books I know about blue-collar work in America, its rewards and

*Larry Brown*

frustrations. It's also dirty, funny, packed with indelible details and moving in its ground-level evocations of courage and camaraderie.

At least twice a year someone will ask me if I can recommend a book to give a man who doesn't read as much as he might. I nearly always reply: *On Fire*, by Larry Brown. It's a gateway drug. It's literary writing of a sort that says, Come as you are.

I am opposed to trigger warnings, but *On Fire* should probably have them. This book will make you want to start smoking again. (Until you recall that Brown died, apparently of a heart attack, at 53.) It may make you want to drink beer while driving slowly and looking at the world, in the late-afternoon light, while listening to music in the front seat of a pickup truck—one of Brown's favorite activities. I cannot in good conscience recommend these things. But Brown does make them sound very sweet indeed.

A few chapters in *On Fire* are about things like dogs, hunting and family. Brown describes his battles, at his rural house, with spiders, mice, coyotes and ticks. These descriptions mostly cannot be printed in this newspaper.

186

About ticks, he writes: "We were afraid we were going to have to burn the house down just to get rid of them. It made us feel like inferior people, although we knew it wasn't our fault. When company was over we'd be shifting our eyes around, looking to see if one was walking."

Most of this book is about Brown and his fellow Oxford firefighters rolling toward unnerving fires and terrible car

ON FIRE

accidents. On his way, his mind plays over lessons and scenarios:

“Remove the car from the victim, not the other way around. You can be faced with anything. A car upside down on top of two people, one dead, one alive. A head-on collision, two dead, two alive, one each in each car. A car flipped up on its side against a tree, the driver between the roof and the tree. A burning car with live occupants trapped inside.”

Brown writes vividly about his fears—about someone dying because of his error, about letting his co-workers down. But he’s just as good on the sort of pride that comes with mastery.

“I love the way the lights are set up on the side of the road at a wreck and I love the way the Hurst Tool opens with its incredible strength and I love the way it crushes the roof posts of a car and I love the way you can nudge it into the hinges of a door and pop the pins off and let the door fall and reach in to see your patient’s legs and what position they are in.”

He continues: “I love to drive to any incident, love to run the siren, to run fast but careful through town. I love the smell of smoke and the feeling of fear that comes on me when I see that a fire is already through the roof and licking at the sky because I know that I am about to be tested again, my muscles, my brain, my heart.”

He’s just as good—forgive me for quoting to this extent—on a firefighter’s downtime, “the movies we watch

*Larry Brown*

at the station and the meals we cook and eat and the targets we shoot with our bows in the afternoons, washing our cars and trucks in the parking lot and sitting out front of the station in chairs at night hollering at people we know passing on the street.”

Early in his career, Brown chafed against being labeled “the fireman-writer.” It sounded cute. Now that he’s long since escaped that fate, his firefighting book needs to be better known.

If you are among the tens of millions who have never read Brown, this is a perfect introduction. He felt life deeply, had a vast understanding of his world and paid attention to what mattered. His basic decency shines through these pages.

Among Southern writers, Brown was one of those who didn’t have too much syrup in him. His prose in *On Fire* is fresh, light on its feet, ready for anything. If this book were a restaurant, I’d eat there all the time.

From *The New York Times*, 6-2-2017 © 2017 *The New York Times*. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States. The printing, copying, redistribution, or retransmission of this Content without express written permission is prohibited.

TOM RANKIN



Larry Brown was born and grew up in Oxford, Mississippi. A marine in the era of the Vietnam War, he joined the Oxford Fire Department in 1973. He resigned in 1990 at the rank of captain. The recipient of the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Literature, the Mississippi Library Association Award for Fiction, and the Mississippi Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, he was also the first two-time winner of the Southern Book Award for Fiction. He was the author of ten published works, including the highly acclaimed *Facing the Music*, *Dirty Work*, and *Joe*. Larry Brown died in 2004.