

THE PROPOSITION OF WRITING

by Larry Brown

EDITOR'S NOTE: *When he died at the age of fifty-three, Larry Brown left behind the almost completed manuscript of a novel, A Miracle of Catfish, which Algonquin will publish in March. Sometimes re-*



Larry Brown,
author of
A Miracle of Catfish

Flannery O'Connor, who I'm happy to admit is one of my idols, said that a writer didn't need to have much happen to him after age twenty-one. She said by that time, there was plenty to write about. And even though I'd had plenty of material for a long time, I didn't know that I needed it or was ever going to want to use it until I was almost thirty. When I was twenty-nine, I stopped and looked at my life and wondered if I was ever going to do anything with it. I had been a firefighter for six years, and on my off days I had set out pine trees, done carpentry work, cleaned carpets, cut pulpwood, deadened timber, you name it. I'd built those chain-link fences for Sears & Roebuck, and painted houses, and I'd hauled hay. I knew what it was like to pick up eighty- and ninety-pound bales and stack them on a truck all day under the sun, and then unload it and stack the bales in some hot old barn full of red wasps. I had

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by Larry Brown
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ferred to as the Fireman Writer, he was self-taught. The following passage, from an address he made at the Fifth Biennial Conference on Southern Literature in 1989, describes the process.

done all these things to support my wife and my two little boys, to make ends meet. When I was in high school I never gave a thought to more education. I did poorly in school, especially in English, and I paid so little attention to that course that I was obliged to attend summer school after my senior year just to get my diploma. I loved reading, and had all my life, but I didn't see how English was going to help me get a job after I got out of school, which was all I wanted to do.

But standing just short of thirty I suddenly realized that if I didn't find something else to do with my life, I was never going to amount to anything. When I had gotten married, I hadn't looked too far into the future. I guess what I thought for most of my life was that I'd just let one day take care of the next. I made it that way okay for a long time, had some good times, some beautiful babies. But those babies were going to grow up. They were going to

want things, and I wanted things to be better for them than they had been for me. I didn't want mine to start out like I did, working in a factory.

The proposition of writing came on me slowly. I had been wondering how this process evolved, how these books and stories came to be written. I knew that people sat down and wrote them, but it seemed almost impossible that people could actually do something like that. I wondered what it took to be a writer, and I wondered if it might be like learning how to build houses, or lay brick, or even fight fires, for that matter. I knew that some writers made a lot of money. I was a big fan of Stephen King, and I knew that his books sold well. The main question was, could a person teach himself how to do it by doing it? It seemed a logical question to me. I had absolutely no idea of the odds against me when I decided to try it.

My wife had an old portable Smith-Corona electric, and I went out and bought a box of typing paper and sat down in our bedroom one night and started writing a novel.

It was about a man-eating bear in Yellowstone National Park, a place I'd never been to, and it had a lot of sex in it. I thought sex sold, because of the Harold Robbins novels I'd read. I was wrong. Nobody in New York wanted it. I know because I almost wore that novel out sending it around. It took me five months to write it and I couldn't understand why nobody wanted it. The main reason they didn't want it, I know now, is because it was horrible. You would not believe how horrible. Just imagine. It was 327 single-spaced pages of sex and man-eating.

That was my first acquaintance with a thing called the Apprenticeship Period, but it got me hooked on writing, on telling a story, putting down words on paper. After that I decided I'd try my hand at short fiction, so I wrote a few horrible short stories. Nobody wanted them either. Nobody would even write anything on a rejection slip. I decided pretty quick that nobody in New York knew his ass from a hole in the ground about fiction, but I decided that I would forge gamely on, in spite of them. ■

"I wondered what it took to be a writer, and I wondered if just anybody could do it."
—LARRY BROWN