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## Introductory Essay

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## LARRY BROWN

**O**n a warm September afternoon almost fourteen years ago, I walked into Bishop Hall and found a kind man I didn't even know then, Evans Harrington, and pressed a burning question on him: Could I take the writing course that fall? I explained that I was not a student, just a resident of Lafayette County, a city firefighter, and a fledgling writer. I had been working for two years on my own, with no direction or guidance, and no real sense of what I wanted to write. I had just published my first story, in *Easyriders*, a motorcycle magazine that generally featured a couple of naked babes astride a chromed iron horse, along with a couple of biker stories each month. I was ready to expand my horizons, and I was nearly desperate for some help.

Evans sent me down the hall to see the teacher, Ellen Douglas, and I repeated my story to her. She wanted to know what I had written, and I told her that I had completed three novels and about eighty short stories. She said that I could attend the class.

Jo Haxton, as I now know her, was a wonderful teacher. Her writing class was exactly what I needed at the time I needed it. She taught out of something I had never seen before, *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, and through it she introduced me to writers like Flannery O'Connor and Joseph Conrad and James Joyce. For the first time I was able to see the kinds of stories I really wanted to write, and I learned what it is that a good story is supposed to do to the reader. I learned that Faulkner's advice, to write about

the truths of the human heart, was dead on. I learned many things I hadn't known before, but mainly I learned that I had a long way to go before I could write the kind of fiction I admired the most and have somebody pay me for it.

We wrote our own stories for the class, and we went home and read the stories she assigned to us from the anthology, and then we came back and talked about everything. She lectured and we took notes. We learned the meaning of words like denouement, and immediacy, and mood. We met one afternoon a week for three and a half months, and I lived for those classes. I wanted to narrow the chasm between what I was writing and what I wanted to write, but sometimes that seemed almost impossible. When I read "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," I was afraid that I would never be able to shake the reader with my work the way Miss Flannery shook me. I had lots of wild hope, but little skill. I did not have any objectivity about my work. I had written a lot of things, but I had not written enough. There was nothing to do but keep on writing, and believe that if I wrote enough, I would eventually learn how.

The writing class was full of enthusiasm, and it was a nurturing environment for all of us. The time seemed to pass too quickly, and one day it was over. I was out on my own again, and ready to work even harder than I had before. I wrote twenty-five stories that next year, 1983, and a novel I can't remember much about now. I sent stories out all the time, and they came back. Those days seem like another life now. My children were small and when I was able to find time to write, I would shut myself away in the kitchen and bang on a little portable Smith-Corona, and the clacking of the keys would go on late into the night. It must have seemed odd to my family, what I was doing. I worked all kinds of part-time jobs to bring in money, along with my fire department job, and on the weekends and evenings I would write.

During a three year span of time I sold three stories, and had my other stories, along with some new novels I wrote, turned down one hundred and twenty-seven times. But that is the nature of a writer's apprenticeship period. You write things in order to learn and they get turned down. You're not able to see for a long time how weak or crippled or wrongheaded your work is. You don't know that the reason your rejection slips come back blank with no handwritten notes of encouragement from the editor is because there are thousands of young writers out there, like you, invisible, full of hope, and all their stories are stacked beside yours in an office somewhere, a mountain of them, a steadily growing, slightly tottering pile. The writers who give up fall by the wayside, their voices never to be heard from in this world. The ones who keep writing will eventually learn how.

Somebody has to read all those things. Somebody has to wade through all that hope, face that mountain every day. It has to be a staggering task. Some people are paid to do it, others work as volunteers. Most of these volunteers work for the literary quarterlies. Some earnest young woman or man plows through those piles on the weekends and the evenings, or takes a stack of them home and reads them on the couch in the living room, searching, always searching for a great new voice crying out to be heard, a voice that is buried and trying to emerge.

Those voices will be heard. The people who work in the literary magazines will see to that, because they are engaged in a noble pursuit, the publishing of literature, wherever it comes from, whatever voice it assumes.

It's not easy to publish in the quarterlies just because some of them are "little." It's just as tough to get in them as it is any other publication of real quality. Poetry is the most potent distillation of the writer's art, the hundred proof that comes from all the mash, and just about all of it that is written in this country finds a home in a literary quarterly.

In 1986 a story of mine called "Facing the Music" was accepted and published by a literary quarterly at Hattiesburg, *The Mississippi Review*, and soon after it appeared I had a book contract, a literary agent, and a publisher. The dream does come true. Your first book is a real object you can hold in your hand.

The acceptance of that story caused me to develop a deep and abiding fondness for literary magazines. I'm still proud and honored to have my work appear in them. You won't get rich publishing your stories in them, but your work will appear beside that of our best writers. And once you have enough stories in print, the next logical step is for some observant book publisher to offer you a warm place to come in out of the cold.

The market is always shrinking, and it becomes harder and harder to find magazines in the grocery store racks that mess around with fiction. The big slicks in New York keep dwindling in number, and you just about have to have an agent to get them to even look at anything these days. But you can find the addresses of the quarterlies quite easily, and the vast majority of them still read over the transom, looking for the shining jewel in that steadily growing mountain of manuscripts.

After I found out what literature was, I started sending my stories to the places that published it. I learned what I needed to do at the university here, had my eyes opened, so to speak, and I've always been grateful for the opportunity I was given. I'm happy to see this literary magazine emerging, and I wish it much success.

The people who work here are like the people I've been talking about, and they probably don't get thanked enough for what they do, but I would like to say thank you here and now, for making real the dreams of so many others who at this moment are writing away out there across the land, believing in themselves, telling their stories, trying to get it right. When they do, some literary magazine like this one will always have a place for it.