All Sporting Endeavor Aspires to the Condition of a Fight

On *Body* by Harry Crews

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In 2012, Harry Crews died at seventy-six of complications from neuropathy, and any standard biography, drawing from Ted Geltner's 2016 *Blood, Bone, and Marrow: A Biography of Harry Crews*, will focus on Crews's upbringing in abject poverty in Bacon County, Georgia, his ascent out of polio and domestic abuse (from a stepfather), after losing his birth father when Crews was age two (as an adult, Crews would lose his own young son to a drowning), into a 30-year writing career. He befriended everyone from Sean Penn and Madonna to Charles Bronson and Robert Blake, garnering him a place in the twentieth-century canon of weird/off-kilter writing as well as a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award.

The son of tenant farmers who grew up staring at the stars through the roof of the shack which served as his bedroom, his childhood household notoriously contained only two books—the Bible and the Sears catalog, with Crews more inspired by the latter, inventing stories about the models and products therein. He served in the Marines, taught himself the literary greats from the base library, and averred that this saved him from a life in prison. A sports fanatic and natural athlete who possessed an ornery and hard-bitten aesthetic—he quite enjoyed being seen as the kind of guy who makes the security guard move their hand toward their weapon whenever Crews entered a bank—he bore on his arm a much-lionized tattoo of e.e. cummings's line "how do you like your blue-eyed boy Mister Death."

All of this informs the 1990 novel *Body*, and well into his sixties Crews maintained his own body, running and lifting weights daily while dating a former regional bodybuilding champion named Maggie Powell. After the military, Crews studied at the University of Florida on the G.I. Bill under the tutelage of Agrarian writer Andrew Lytle, founder of the creative writing program at UF, who was simpatico with Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate.

Aside from blowing paychecks at local gin mills (on plentiful drugs, booze, and women), Crews could be both abjectly cantankerous or overwhelmingly affable to the townies in Gainesville. He was beloved around the scene's dive bars and adored by his creative writing students, of whom literary fictioneer Kevin Canty and bestselling mystery writer Michael Connelly are the best known. Industrious, straightforward, and a declarative dispenser of advice about the writing life, Crews rejected the oft-affixed label of "Southern gothic" (and all labels other than "writer").

Crews, whose archives are housed at the University of Georgia at Athens, was part of the New Journalism era, and published columns for *Esquire* and *Playboy*. He's known for a string of novels and his memoir *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* (1978). Upon its 2022

reissue as a Penguin Classic, Casey Cep in *The New Yorker* called *A Childhood* "one of the finest memoirs ever written," a book that "animates nostalgia and then annihilates it." *The Hawk is Dying* (1973), *The Gypsy's Curse* (1974), *A Feast of Snakes* (1976), *Florida Frenzy* (1982), *Scar Lover* (1992)—the titles point effortlessly at Crews's niche—and his debut *The Gospel Singer* (1968) all maintain varying levels of renown.

In a March 15, 2022 piece in the *Los Angeles Times,* Lauren Leblanc describes Crews as a provocateur "who inspired a diverse generation," a bridge between Southern writers past and present, and a "problematic white, male Southern writer" due to affairs with students in his private life and his uses of racially insensitive language in his public fiction, though both the behavior and the argot were very much of their time, and some authors today still refuse to self-censor, tone down, or appease. Richard Howorth, of Square Books in Oxford, Mississippi, calls Crews "distinctly Southern" and "unquestionably unaffected, genuine. There was no one like him." LeBlanc also writes that "there is nothing folksy, never mind pastoral or genteel, about Crews." His writing is caustic, uncanny, his unspooling literary mind that of an unsentimental outlaw. The contemporary genre-smashing African-American noir author S.A. Cosby sees Crews's great contribution in how he went beyond the gothic narratives of Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor to depict a nightmarish grotesque, an anti-pastoralist view of the South and of America. This take elevates Crews well beyond the "dead white male" denotation/denigration. He was a libertine, not a misogynist, and his legacy is also complemented (and complimented) by acolytes Kim Gordon, Lydia Lunch, and Maud Newton—the last his former student and a leftist voice of high acumen both in her former guise as a first-generation book blogger and now as a nonfiction chronicler in *Ancestor Trouble* (2022). Newton sees Crews's legacy as linked to his heroes, O'Connor and Eudora Welty, whereas Lunch, the great feminist post-Beat east-coast poet, and Gordon, the great feminist west-coast indie rock frontwoman once combined with drummer Sadie Mae for a punk band named: Harry Crews.

Dwight Garner finds the comic and the bizarre in Crews, tying him together with Barry Hannah and Larry Brown as "part of a Southern writers' movement that centered dissidents and outsiders." Garner sees posterity in their "misfit wisdom" and positions these "rough south" fellows alongside their sistren Bobbie Ann Mason and Jayne Anne Phillips within a micro-genre called "grit lit," which implies inclusion with the K-Mart realism of Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Robert Stone, Tim O'Brien, Douglas Unger, Joy Williams, and Tobias Woolf.

In *Body*, Crews's protagonist's "deadname" of Dorothy reads like a direct allusion to the American South literary legend Dorothy Allison. Crews's other works might be better known, but it is in *Body* that he leans most into the role of not just status quo–violator but miner, toiling in the dark and sweaty recesses of the caverns of the human while maintaining a glittering humor, a most sardonic smirk at the American consumerist swamp. David Haward Bain, editor of *Whose Woods These Are: A History of the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, 1926-1992* (1993), encapsulates Crews's charisma: "his close-cropped hair, squinty eyes, razor-trimmed muttonchop sideburns, and infectious and flamboyant manner, developed an instant following." His attitude towards teaching was often summed up as: Every lecture a performance. And performance is at the heart of *Body*'s documentation of the rise of the bodybuilding movement.

For all the literary credibility of the aforementioned comparisons and bonafides, none of Crews's cohort (not even Norman Mailer, who thought of Crews as beginning "where James Dickey left off") wrote a racially combustible, gender-detonating, class-centered

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but never proletarian-preachy novel set at a women's bodybuilding competition in Miami at the end of the 1980s. *Body* is a work that levitates out of Crews's bibliography as particularly modern.

Its transcending of gender, racial, and class politics, its ahead-of-its-time trans narratives, its renegade repurposing of sports narratives and drug narratives, its edifications and non-reifications of "the dirty South" and its extremes, in an America perpending the decline of the Soviet bloc, all roil together in a transgressive and subversive mode that merges with that of the era's iconoclastic titans: Bret Easton Ellis, Kathy Acker, Dennis Cooper, Gary Indiana, Wayne Koestenbaum, A.M. Homes, Irvine Welsh, and Michel Houellebecq. Maud Newton writes in her 2012 elegy from *The Awl*: "In his fiction and in his life, Harry Crews empathized most with the people who needed it most: the freaks, the fuck-ups, people who'd been broken by loss of one kind or another." *Body* may read as outlandish or politically incorrect in the mid-2020s, but its determined effort to empathize with the downtrodden—to expose, explore, and explain the deprivations and excesses of American ambition— is unarbitrated, unvarnished, unflinching, and inimitable; unlikely even from an independent publisher in today's safe-at-all-costs literary economy.

The most prescient aspect of *Body* is its fascination with self-invention. Its world of bodybuilding and gym obsessives is full of post-Reaganites and proto-Rogan listeners, deep in the blue collar "have-nots" landscape, but with some of the white collar "haves" already aspiring to Silicon Valley, South Beach, and corporate Vegas glitz, the "I'll live forever and stay young and good looking 'til the end"sters who think supplements, cold plunges, and unironic mustaches will carve a path to their own deification and immortality.

Within this setting, we're still a couple of years before *The Real World* and RuPaul, before *The Crying Game* winning awards and Kurt Cobain donning dresses, and before the arrival of other pop-culture entities that would collapse binaries and unlock new frontiers of weirdness while mainstreaming the underground. Crews hones in on the fear of dying unknown; a pre-smartphone, pre-internet herald of Andy Warhol's "fifteen minutes of fame" gone meta (and Meta). The enlightened reality-makers and deluded reality-deniers of *Body* constitute its cast of characters: Caucasian protagonist Shereel Dupont (nee Dorothy Turnipseed), competing to win the title of Ms. Cosmos, her coach Russell "Muscle" Morgan, her Black opponent and that opponent's Black coach, Marvella Washington and Wallace "The Wall" Wilson, and our protagonist's white trash family with their fear of cultural change and a "make American great again" worldview long before the rise of that northerner Donald Trump, whom Crews met personally and who's much referenced in *Body*.

Real-life Trump, then in his Atlantic City hotelier and casino-operator phase, escorted Crews to his front-row seat alongside Madonna and Sean Penn for the Mike Tyson-Michael Spinks bout in 1988, and *Body* embodies the fight, the war, the contentiousness that is our current-day (and eternal) currency. "Few writers are so

relentlessly concerned with the physical rather than the intellectual," John L. Williams argues in *3:AM Magazine*. The blackest of comedies, *Body* is grim at times, hilariously unfiltered at others, ecstatic and anything but congenial.

By the late eighties, we'd had the rise of Arnold Schwarzenegger and *Pumping Iron* (1977), the subculture of Mr. Olympia competitions and their ilk, a period documented in George Gallo's *Bigger*, the 2018 movie about Joe Weider and his brothers founding the International Foundation of Bodybuilders and launching the gym movement as much as Jane Fonda did. Readers may also conjure up 2024's *Love Lies Bleeding*, a 1989-set LGBT crime-romance directed by Rose Glass starring Kristen Stewart as a woman in love with an aspiring female bodybuilder, 2023's *Magazine Dreams* from Elijah Bynum and starring Jonathan Majors as a Black man navigating the world of bodybuilding celebrity, or even *Rocky IV* (1985), where Russia provides the antagonist via Dolph Lundgren as Ivan Drago, signaled as evil because he uses steroids.

Crews wasn't a mainstream filmmaker repositioning the Cold War, nor a genre-postmodernist breaking down signified and signifier. He was a survivor who loved gladiatorship, boxing, and martial arts, as seen in his books *Karate is a Thing of the Spirit* (1971) and *The Knockout Artist* (1988). One of the few literary works that serve as a real antecedent to *Body* is Leonard Gardner's sole novel, the boxing classic *Fat City* (1969). By this point in his career, Crews was wearing a slightly ridiculous mohawk alongside his scars and grizzled countenance and, yes, still had an earned toughness that'd make anyone who'd glance twice extremely unlikely to call him out on it. But by the time he hit his mid-50s, he was closer to a traditional professor, no longer galivanting into days-long benders with hillbilly carnies or Alaskan pipeliners. Crews's spin on Walter Pater's quote, "All art aspires to the condition of music" is "All sporting endeavor aspires to the condition of a fight."

Body opens with a scene between coach and pupil. The comedic conceit has Russell "Muscle" Morgan literally screwing his prodigy Shereel DuPont in order to sweat her down under the weight limit for her class. He provides instruction, guidance, funds, and protection amidst quasi-criminal surroundings —cheats and scammers within and without the bodybuilding world—bringing to mind the numinous nature of the Southern mafia, redolent of songs by Jason Isbell and Drive-By Truckers, the noir-tinged novels of John Brandon, the film-worlds of Jeremy Saulnier, and the new-canon nonfiction of John Jeremiah Sullvan.

Immersing the reader in turn-of-the-nineties capitalism, *Body*'s men peacock and display value. They're often war veterans. Women are often secretaries, and Dorothy/Shereel is a secretary-turned-superstar. The tactile sensations of stardom invoke both the Warholian and, well, let's call it Dana White-ish, Vince McMahon-esque; the worlds of MMA and WWE are brewing here. As is the female combatant narrative, where films like Karyn Kusama's *Girlfight* (2000) and Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and novels like Erika Krouse's *Contenders* (2015) and Rita Bullwinkel's *Headshot* (2024) would burble forth in coming years.

Body's subtitle is "a tragicomedy." This term encompasses a lot in 2025—from the films of Alexander Payne to the novels of Jonathan Franzen to the TV program *The Bear*—but there are few middle or upper classers here, no northeastern, Californian, or midwestern cities. This is the humidity-drenched deep South, a realm of redneckery and constant racial and gender tensions, where Sean Baker's film *The Florida Project* (2017), and his trans-focused and sex-worker-humanizing filmography, bears mention as well.

Permeating *Body* there's an unremittent raucous quality that an author unfamiliar with poverty and Southern life would've mangled, but Crews grants his characters, however low

class and callous, dignity: these folks are every bit as worthy of both empathy and satire as anyone. It's a picaresque burlesque, downright slapstick at times, a manic energy pervasive.

"The dark" is omnipresent, though "dark humor," as it's used today, wasn't a widespread term at the turgid turn of the nineties. *Body*'s blurbs, however, provide a thrum of the dawning zeitgeist. The *Chicago Tribune* deems Crews "the resident storyteller of today's South," knighting him with a mix of the masculine and the feminine: "muscular, belligerent, but also touching." The *New York Times Book Review* calls him Swiftian, a comic moralist defined by ferocity and Wildean wit. And *The Philadelphia Inquirer* praises the author as colorful, unpredictable.

If the works of Larry McMurtry present a sort of dying South, Crews presents the insuppressible and unkillable zombie South, complete with a jawbone full of chaw, spitting tobacco juice and the n-word with equal disdain, enemy of Yankee northernness, enforced "progress," or really any externally defined values at all, the land of "rebels" who never wanted your colonization and "education" to begin with, tetchy from being part of the American empire, a secessionist core to the superstructure that's contemptuous and unapologetic, repudiating the urbane and polished. At one point a Vietnam vet named Nail Head opines that it always comes down to the knife eventually, so why all the platitudes and fake politeness?

This is sometimes posited as the appeal of Donald Trump: the unapologetic swaggerer who exhorts others not to apologize, a throwback to a rougher, crueler, lie-filled but somehow more "honest" time of social-Darwinist excess. Trump receives his first mention in Chapter 9. The antagonist bodybuilder Marvella is a doper, and her lineage is contrasted with real-life bodybuilders Frank Zane, Lou Ferrigno, Lee Haney, and of course Arnold Schwarzenegger (a Trump predecessor in some ways). The time is one wherein the gender dynamics of women's bodybuilding were shifting away from the first-ever Ms. Olympia Rachel McLish—"she was muscular, and also perfectly symmetrical and coordinated, but most of all she could be put in a dress and taken home to mother. But in a short period of time following Rachel McLish's reign as world champion, if you put a world-class female bodybuilder in a dress, she could not be taken home to mother or many other places because they looked like men tricked out in women's clothing." There's even an explicit comment that the judges and fans of the sport are in the process of deciding "what the ideal woman ought to look like."

Marvella's African-American trainer predicts the POC Trump voter in lines like "He had decided it was the American way. Where was the American who owned anything that he did not wish was bigger? Wall's waking hours were haunted by Donald Trump, and his dreams were shot through with whole populations of Donald Trumps."

Crews's preternatural gift for the darkly comic and truly America-skewering runs deep in these Trump-alluding chapters where he sets up the novel's conflict: the "good" white bodybuilder who looks like a trad woman vs. the "bad" Black bodybuilder who looks like a trans-male. Marvella's an antagonist but not a villain. She's a victim of the patriarchy too. Wall constantly talks about how he trains Marvella like a horse and owns her like a slave, claiming to own her sisters as well, "the way Jesus owned the disciples." Wall, Marvella, and her sisters hail from Detroit, and the sisters are named Starvella, Shavella, Jabella, and Vanella; the last "the lightest-skinned by far, and the most beautiful," in a vicious satire of colorism. Wall repeatedly claims ownership over women, but what owns him? The quest for Trump and company's atavistic "great"ness, fame and fortune, the American dream. He and Marvella's motto? "Greatness or death." The abiding corporeal awareness in *Body* manifests in forms both hilarious and searing.

As *Body* turns towards its climax, the explicit coach-athlete relationship is given uneasy airing when Shereel responds to her trainer Russell's exhortations that "I'm the one who trained you…I'm the one who got you here," with, "You swung the whip. I'm the one who hurt and sweated blood."

Crews really cooks up the Great (Southern) American Novel here, putting everything into it—all the people and history and concepts. When Don DeLillo or Thomas Pynchon does this, it's called a "systems novel," while writers like Crews are often regionalized or minimized by a literary community unlikely to grant him the accolades hurled at writers like DeLillo or Pynchon. Not that these authors are in any way undeserving, but they have far fewer scenes like one where Russell looks at Shereel's foil Marvella with "asexual admiration. He would no more have thought of fucking her than he would have thought of fucking a statue of General Lee in a public park." The faint of heart might lament the directness of Crews's language, but I dare them to find me in American literature a macho "alpha-male" comparing the perfect form of a Black female athlete to a statue of the most infamous internal antagonist in US history or the audacity and perspicacity to compare Sheree's family hooting and hollering at the contestants' flexing and crabbing to the roars of adulation that once attended American lynchings.

Crews also tilts at 1980s "gym culture" as inception point, a sort of Dylanesque idea that, "Life isn't about finding yourself…it's about creating yourself." *Body* is also published within the timeframe just before Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) would comment on the commodification and feminization of the American male, and just after Warhol's superstars and drag queens were reconstructing the gender paradigm in the AIDS-era New York City documented in the artworks and literature of David Wojnarowicz. The deep-South settings of Crews's work, far from Armistead Maupin's or Susan Sontag's interrogations of the queering of the culture, were mostly precluded from such discourse at the time. And the bodybuilders in Crews's novel—preening and posing, with fake-tanned skin and shaved-down smoothness—model the identity replication done nowadays online, the dermabrasion that is one's e-dentity on social media or dating websites.

Russell Muscle's an OG bodybuilder. He trains women but doesn't think men should serve as judges for the female division and nostalgizes his field: "The whole sport had changed up on him. When he started, there had been no women and no she-men, or none that he knew of." This newness he's faced with reminds of nothing so much as the ardent Trump supporter, a MAGA revanchism that unfurls in some of Crews's best prose in the book: "It made him feel weird," is his description of Russell's purview (and "weird" was a term much discussed in the leadup to the Trump-Harris presidential election, both parties wielding it to marginalize the other), "made him feel lost, the way he might feel if he went out one night and instead of walking into his own house, he made a wrong turn and walked into the house of a neighbor where everything was strange and where he did not belong."

In *The Southern Literary Journal*, Frank W. Shelton argues: "Crews's fiction centers on the

underlying tension between man's yearning for perfection, yet the inevitable imperfection of the world and life in it…manifested in the body, conflicts with his yearning for spiritual perfection. Crews evokes the traditional duality of body and spirit, the body representing the biological trap man finds himself in, which intensifies his yearning for spiritual sustenance…Crews treats physical rituals as manifestations of man's search for value. Looking at his novels…I contended that 'the hope they offer has been gradually reduced, that the sustaining role ritual can play has diminished, and that the arena in which man can constructively act has become narrower and narrower until it virtually disappears.'" *Body*'s conclusion will support Shelton's nihilistic reading.

As *Body* turns towards its climax, the explicit coach-athlete relationship is given uneasy airing when Shereel responds to her trainer Russell's exhortations that "I'm the one who trained you…I'm the one who got you here," with, "You swung the whip. I'm the one who hurt and sweated blood." This parallels the dray horse verbiage that Wall hurls at Marvella and evokes the virulence of both slavery and animal abuse. The taskmaster pose of the older mentor sexually entangled with his charge calls the reader's mind to both the #MeToo movement and to "tiger moms" and the overambitious coaches and parents living vicariously through their children's academic, artistic, and athletic achievements, a worldwide phenomenon that crosses cultural, ethnic, and class boundaries.

Russell tells Shereel, "there are posters of you plastered on walls all over this country and half of Europe," that she's the result of their shared ambition, and that victory will make her a "somebody…the very best of her kind…special in a way very few people are ever privileged to know." If this isn't the Olympics and the Oscars, child beauty pageants and gameshow contestants, Instagrammers and TikTok aspirants, I don't know what is. The blurbs call Crews "Swiftian," but his approach is less clinical and poetic than Swift's, his American ironist's approach more a mashup of Mark Twain and Larry Flynt. *Body* furnishes all our masquerade, maquillage, and armor, a novel peopled by beleaguered souls (much like the bifurcated political parties in the mid-2020s) desperate to outdo each other, to have their worldview triumph at any cost.

We get another ripping Trump aside as, before weigh-in, Wallace sleeps in the same room with Marvella and her sisters, a "long desperate night holding his hard cock and listening to pussy snoring all around him while he dreamed on and off of Donald Trump. Not really Donald Trump exactly, but rather the way he acquired things. *Acquisitions*. Wallace had learned the word some time back, at about the same time he became fascinated with Trump." The root word of "fascinate" means "to paralyze," and Wallace is a Black character who has become fascinated, charmed, who considers himself a patriot, as did Trump's increased minority voting bloc in 2024. Wallace imagines "franchised Black Magic gyms all over the country," endorsements and strength supplements "sold in gymnasiums and health stores," and even "a line of clothing, both for the street and for the gym, and shoes." Not yet two years after the first Spike Lee/Michael Jordan Nike commercial, in the nascent days of "streetwear" before it rose to high fashion, Wall dreams of "Mercedes, Oriental rugs, European hotels, a personal cook, a personal pilot," and Trump's yacht with phones "for nearly every foot his yacht measured in length."

The final chapter proffers the showdown. Shereel and Marvella arrive, eye each other and smile, balancing in each other's gaze. Her father Fonse, who's never seen her compete, is shocked by her transformation. "You can't git to look like that by accident," he states. "She did it to herself. She made herself into somethin' else." And while it's easy to read this as a literal patriarch offended by his grown-woman daughter making a strange/

weird/feminist choice that rails against traditional definitions of "womanhood," his response mellows and he asks after his wife, who's found her way to their seats, and his sons remind him that Ernestine didn't want to see the backstage prejudgment up close. "By God, she was right," Fonse muses aloud, a know-nothing wishing he hadn't been stripped of his illusions.

Crews paces his novel well, tunnels into his female protagonist's interiority, her single-minded purpose, her attitude that second place is no place, inconceivable. The novel ends more tragically than comically, and violence erupts in ways I'll leave unspoiled.

This novel, bellicose and nihilistic both, is Crews's satirical attempt at redemptive justice, an inversion of all the ugly racial history, the most carceral and murderous abuses of power, the corrupt and racist decisions handed down by (almost always white male) cops and judges over the long and burdened history of both Southern region and American nation. This level of sublimated anger turned sublime tragicomedy has few practitioners. David Lynch's oeuvre contends with whiteness, violence, and American rot, often focusing on the disfigured. James Hannaham's PEN/Faulkner-winning *Delicious Foods* (2014) is written in a jagged Southern vernacular, a ribald novel as ominous as the Kara Walker silhouettes which bedeck its cover art, an allegory full of gruesome disfigurement about how humans never cease trying to own and exploit each other, often under racial rubrics, a book that excoriates slavery and trafficking not just in the past but in the present.

Two other works offering a Crews-ian rage-humor cocktail are Mat Johnson's graphic novel *Incognegro* (2008) and Percival Everett's novel *The Trees* (2021). Both obsess over that very Southern grotesquerie, the legacy of lynching, in fine and funny fables that unpack the necessarily virulent imagery of cruelty, degradation, and disfiguration. In league with Lynch and this trio of contemporary African-American authors, Crews's articulations on the myriad deformities of body and life wrought by the American cauldron of objectification and the Southern still of dehumanization look straight ahead and unblinking at the carcasses, the bodies, the strange fruit scattered through region and country alike. A