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## THIS IS IT: A REVIEW OF LARRY BROWN'S *TINY LOVE: THE COMPLETE STORIES*

*Tiny Love: The Complete Stories of Larry Brown.* Larry Brown, with a foreword by Jonathan Miles. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. 2019. 443 pp. \$18.95 (paperback).

"A career-spanning collection," says the inside front flap. All of Larry Brown's short stories bound together between two light brown, heavyweight paper covers. *Tiny Love: The Complete Stories of Larry Brown* is a capacious assembly of Brown's short fiction. Published initially across disparate venues, from biker magazines to little magazines and journals of the American South, as well as in two short-story collections, *Facing the Music* and *Big Bad Love*, *Tiny Love*'s twenty-seven short stories are essential reading for Larry Brown fans, or those soon to be. *Tiny Love* is a comprehensive literary affair, albeit one with shortcomings that fail to fully account for and celebrate the richness of Larry Brown's clever, engaging work.

New and novice readers of Larry Brown's short fiction, including those coming to his stories already familiar with his novels, memoirs, or films, will find a single volume that showcases the career development of a self-taught writer whose short stories mature over a little more than a decade. "Facing the Music" remains *the* initiation story and not just because Brown's future editor Shannon Ravenel, in an interview for *Publishing Research Quarterly*, describes "Facing the Music" as "the best short story I think I've ever read." The tension between the narrator and his wife is palpable right from the beginning. Reading the story's opening lines, "I cut my eyes sideways because I know what's coming. 'You want the light off, honey?' she says. Very quietly" (19) still gives me chills, not only because I know exactly "what's coming" in the rest of the narrative, but because the simple prose of articulating the act of "cut(ing)" one's eyes "sideways" foreshadows the narrator's complex trepidations and anxieties that will follow. The wife's "very quiet" asking of her husband in the story's opening





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is not deferential but rather deftly belies her desire to negotiate intimacies, a subject with its subset of complexities. The narrator tells us:

She may start rubbing on me. That's what I have to watch out for. That's what she does. She gets in bed with me when I'm watching a movie, and she starts rubbing on me. I can't stand it. I especially can't stand for the light to be on when she does it. If the light's on when she does it, she winds up crying in the bathroom. That's the kind of husband I am. (20-21)

Such writing as this evokes impassioned responses. Brown has a knack for this type of prose: direct and penetrating, opening up the complex worlds he creates where just about everything rests on the edge of disaster. As Larry Brown once told interviewer Susan Ketchin in *Conversations with Larry Brown*, "My fiction is about people surviving, about people proceeding out of calamity." "Facing the Music" is a literary example of this process par excellence.

As such, *Tiny Love* reminds readers that literary characters, good ones anyway, are neither real humans nor stereotypes, as longtime enthusiasts of Brown's oeuvre certainly understand. No longer will readers have to negotiate around the pages of soft-core pornographic photographs of biker women in the June 1982 issue of *Easyriders* if they want to read Brown's first-published story, "Plant Growin' Problems." Brown's depiction of characters with lines like "Sheriff Cecil Taylor lay on his enormous gut and wiped away the streams of sweat running down under his sunglasses" (2) epitomizes Brown's realistic description. Furthermore, the importance of Sheriff Taylor's "enormous gut" anticipates events later in the narrative, how Taylor will physically negotiate the hot and humid landscape, all without exhaustively explicating his limited physical prowess in subsequent pages. Indeed, Brown's depictions of his characters are hallmarks of his ability to articulate fictional worlds with elegant literary indeterminacy.

While Brown's masterful writing is the main draw of *Tiny Love*, the book's materiality is also worthy of consideration. The book's cover, far from glossy, has a rough, slightly stippled texture. The deckle-edge pages of *Tiny Love* contrast with the book's standard perfect binding. Such coarseness is perhaps the result of decisions made by Algonquin Books to reinforce Brown's association with "rough south" writers, even though Brown eschewed the idea of labeling his writing (xix). The parsimonious front cover reading "TINY LOVE" and "LARRY BROWN" in distressed-black, all-capital Courier is a





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loud and clear address to readers. “The Complete Stories” sits in the middle of the cover in red type that draws the reader’s gaze to the center of the book. The sparseness of the book’s cover hails potential readers, making it clear that this is the culminating work of Larry Brown, despite its publication more than fifteen years since Brown’s untimely passing.

*Tiny Love* is also chock-full of what Scott Romine sees in *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* as the “narcotic export” of southernness through the use of conspicuous paratext. *Tiny Love* certainly recycles previous praise for Brown as a writer, not only on the book’s back cover, on the inside cover flap, but for seven full pages before the title page. Yet it is not necessarily the case that these accolades, designed to invite readers to see Brown’s writing through the eyes of serious writers and reviewers, produce and reproduce the idea of southern literature, irrespective of content, for consumers to purchase. For every “Larry Brown . . . is a choir of Southern voices” and “a fresh tattoo on the big right arm of Southern Lit” in *Tiny Love*, there are descriptions of Brown’s work as “literature of the first order” and “so vividly written it is almost cinematic.” Though Brown seemed uneasy with the reception of his work, telling interviewer Orman Day in “That Secret Code” that “[t]here are a lot of different reactions to my work. I’ve never gotten used to all of them,” reading these blurbs is to appreciate the preeminence of Brown’s literary contributions before engaging with a single line of Brown’s prose.

Readers also receive additional background on Brown’s literary mastery in Jonathan Miles’s twenty-three page forward to *Tiny Love*. Miles contextualizes Brown’s stories as works of art from his “humble, almost impetuous start to his eventual rank among the vanguard of American realists” (xii). Miles’s anecdotes about time spent with Brown, Brown’s family and friends, and Brown’s career trajectories are funny and compassionate, especially for readers who want to learn more about Brown’s life story beyond the photograph and biographical caption on the inside back cover flap of *Tiny Love*. Miles also takes the time to illuminate brief publication histories of some of Brown’s lesser-known stories, those that appear outside of *Facing the Music* and *Big Bad Love*. Miles reads Brown’s story “Tiny Love” as a “tragicomic romp about the limits of love” (xx), situating the story alongside “Nightmare,” “The Crying,” “And Another Thing,” and “A Birthday Party” as coming from the period when Brown “moved the goalposts for himself” (xvi), from writing as a means to





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supplement his family's income to a means of making art. Indeed, the former story of this group reflects Brown's experimentation with form:

He (Tiny) would roll her in her wheelchair with her thin legs crossed under a robe and lovingly draw a tub of warm water, testing it frequently with his hand, talking softly to her, making sure the water wasn't too cold or too hot, and then together he would work her out of her robe and he would help her pull her arms out of the entrapments of the sleeves until she sat naked and pale and defenseless and semicrippled and slightly drunk in the chair, and he would slide his hands under her legs, feeling the movement of her loose skin under the slack muscles of her thighs, and lift her, gently, careful not to bump her, and pick her up, stand balanced with the precious weight of her in his arms, his hands cradling the soft, withered flesh of her back and legs, and lower her, gradually, slowly and carefully, almost herniating himself sometimes, into the warm water, and bring her an ashtray and replenish her drink, and he would sit there and bathe her back, her little sad and drooping breasts, and she would talk about David Letterman and what he'd said, and he would rinse her back slowly, lovingly, and try to fix her eyes with his eyes, and she would prattle on, the water cooling, her toes red and distorted and pruney. (182-183)

Seeing these narrowly circulated stories in *Tiny Love* gives readers the chance to experience Brown's move from literary apprenticeship to the mastery found in his later works.

Yet it is Miles's attention to the provenance of Brown's short fiction where he gets himself into trouble. Miles fails to properly acknowledge the history of Brown's short stories, completely erasing the fact that Larry Brown's literary career earnestly begins by publishing stories in literary magazines from the American South. *Mississippi Review* publishes "The Rich" (1985) and "Facing the Music" (1986), the latter effectively launching Brown's career. Additionally, "Kubuku Rides (This Is It)" appears in the 1987-1988 volume of *The Greensboro Review*, winning that journal's yearly prize for fiction, and "Samaritans" appears in *St. Andrews Review* in the Spring/Summer 1988 issue. All of these stories circulate to audiences before the release of *Facing the Music*. Additionally, "Big Bad Love" appears in the Fall 1989 volume of *The*





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*Chattahoochee Review*, nearly a full year before the release of Brown's second collection of short stories, *Big Bad Love*. Even *Tiny Love*'s colophon makes no mention of these venerable, southern literary magazines as sites of first publication of some of Brown's most famous work. Since Miles introduces the histories of some of Brown's short stories in the first place, his incomplete publication history of Brown's work prevents readers from seeing both the prolific nature of his literary production and the interdependence between little magazines and the trajectory of Brown's writing career.

However, the task at hand is to consider Brown's stories earnestly. To choose a favorite from a definitive collection of an artist whose work you love is an impossible affair. Thankfully, *Tiny Love* provides the broadest compilation of Brown's stories in circulation. The simultaneously skewering and self-effacing prose of "The Rich" remains a personal favorite. This third-person narrative implicates both travel agent Mr. Pellisher and his wealthy clients, fashioning a Thorstein Veblen-style critique of the late-capitalist service economy:

He knows the rich can never be poor, that the poor can never be rich. He hates himself for being so nice to the rich. He knows the rich do not appreciate it. . . . Mr. Pellisher feeds off the rich. He sucks their blood, drawing it little by little into himself, a few dollars at a time, with never enough to satisfy his lust, slake his thirst. (50-51)

Beyond the escapism of drinking, violence, or infidelity, characters like Mr. Pellisher retreat from life's drudgery and precarity into their own psychological interiority. In "Sleep," the narrator's memories and dreams are his preferred destination to the futility and lack of agency in choosing to get out of bed, "It's useless anyway, and I just do it for her, and I never get through doing it" (303). Yet Brown reminds his readers that breaking "the boredom of an otherwise routine afternoon" (443) has unforeseen consequences, especially for characters in "A Roadside Resurrection," the volume's final work.

Yet life is far less predictable for many of Brown's characters. Disruption is front and center in "Samaritans," as the narrator ultimately learns to agree with the characterization that he is "a dumb sumbitch" (101). Similar change comes crashing in "Kubuku Rides (This Is It)" when Angel decides that she's "gonna speed up and leave them behind" (38), or in sudden departures in "Big Bad Love" when Leroy comes home to find, "there on the coffee table, held





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down by an empty beer bottle, (was) a note that was addressed to me” (265). Such narrative twists are part and parcel to Brown’s short prose, and despite Brown’s regular use of subtle foreshadowing, readers should expect surprises throughout *Tiny Love*.

To be sure, Brown’s short stories offer readers the literary richness and diversity deserving of the paratextual praise that graces *Tiny Love*’s covers and prefatory pages. Short of a future critical edition of his writing, *Tiny Love* is likely Larry Brown’s final published work and a welcome haunting of some of the finest literature to grace our bookshelves. All of *Tiny Love*’s stories embody what Miles’s introduction suggests, that Larry Brown’s interests in writing were about what “his characters’ hearts contained: love, grief, meanness, longing, fear, hurt . . . those that came from being human” (xix).

