

THE MULCHING OF AMERICA Harry Crews (*Simon & Schuster, \$22*) A ferocious writer, Crews pummels his characters into submission, mercilessly putting them through their paces and chuckling all the while. Here he tackles Hickum Looney, a door-to-door salesman at Soaps for Life. The company's head is a megalomaniacal, harelipped little terror who keeps his employees in thrall *and* in chains—until the arrival of Gaye Nell Odell, a tough-talking and genuinely tough former hooker who comes to his rescue. Crews always elicits a few gasps with his black, two-fisted sense of humor. But the targets here—the sales manual as Bible, the company as heartless—are puny, and the novel ends with a thud. Crews is swatting at flies when he should be gunning for bear. **C+** —MG