

— IN MEMORIAM —

## J.P.S. BROWN

1930 — 2021

I WAS ON A TRAIN from London to Brussels the first time I read *The Forests of the Night*. Instead of looking out the window at Leeds Castle and the cobbled streets of Lille, I was looking at a marauding jaguar in Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental, some 6,000 miles away. I could see him, even though I was hurtling through Europe at 300 kilometers per hour. I also heard the sound of a young duck as it dove under the surface of the water. And I tasted the wild honey that filled the *enjambre* in the spring. And I smelled the thick, white smoke from the fire in the shade of the *aliso* tree. It was all right there in the book.

At the Cronkite School, we teach young writers a core tenet of the craft: "Show, don't tell." It can be traced to Chekhov, who is quoted as saying:

"Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass." Those aren't his exact words, but they do show that by grouping together small details, a writer can paint a picture in the reader's mind. J.P.S. Brown was a master of that. Like Emily Luchetti turning flour and butter into croquembouche, he used sensory details to make jaguars come to life. And horses gallop off the page.

"The top horse in my string that year was a spayed mare we called Mae West," he wrote. "She could run a hole in the wind, but her best performance was not anything like Shorty's. Shorty had swelled up like a bomb. Then, instead of blowing up, he used his power as a jet, ran as though his feet didn't touch the ground, and shot through that horde like a torpedo."

Sadly, we lost Joe Brown in January. He died peacefully at his home in Patagonia. He was 90. By any measure, Joseph Paul Summers Brown lived an extraordinary life. He'd been a boxer, Marine, journalist, cattle trader, rancher, gold prospector, movie wrangler, whiskey smuggler and fiction writer. He had many wives, too. Between 1952 and 1965 alone, there were three. The third, a Zapotec woman who technically was his mistress, tried to kill him. She was furious about his plan to marry Jo Baeza, a longtime contributor to this magazine. When the gun misfired, she laced his stew with strychnine. That didn't work, either.

Throughout his life, Joe tiptoed on a tightrope — with his work, his wives and everything else, including his airplanes.



Once, when he was flying north from Mexico, he lost power. The only option was to land on the freeway below. Right behind a Volkswagen. "I was going to eat the Volkswagen," he said, "so I veered off the road down a sharp incline, clipping one wing on a telephone pole. That Volkswagen never had a clue. He just kept on going."

Like a man dropping off a rental car, Joe walked away without a scratch. Maybe that's why his friends in the Sierra Madre called him *El Mostrenco* — The Unbranded One. His friend Jim Harrison called him something similar: "the great restorer of the great American quest." The two men, cut from the same cloth, shared the grasslands of Southern Arizona and a gift for writing.

Joe discovered his talent at Notre Dame, but he didn't get serious

about writing until 1964, while recovering from hepatitis at his grandmother's home in Nogales. The stories he wrote eventually became his first book, *Jim Kane*, about a down-and-out cowboy who traded cattle in Mexico. The book was published in 1970. Two years later, it was made into a movie called *Pocket Money*, starring Paul Newman and Lee Marvin, who referred to Joe as "the wildest son-of-a-bitch that ever walked." Carole King wrote and sang the theme song.

In October 1970, around the same time his book came out, Joe made his debut in *Arizona Highways*. He wrote about what he knew. "In any primer on cowboys, this rule would have to be the first: Cowboying is learned as a way of life, not just a vocation, not out of books, not by grunting and trying hard, not by a desire to be a cowboy, and not by donning a big hat and a pair of boots."

In a *Letter to the Editor* in January 1971, Phyllis Lockhart of Vernon, Arizona, said the story was "as close to the heart of a cowboy as one can get." H.R. Jordan of Arlington, Texas, was equally impressed: "Mr. Brown's masterful sweat-of-the-saddle and sometimes unexpurgated detailing sets him apart as a teller of cowboy tales."

He could write, all right, but like so many great writers — Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, O'Neill — Joe was an elbow-bender. "I'd use the whiskey to keep me going when

I was writing," he said. "I'd get into this groove where I didn't stop working except to eat and sleep. Pretty soon I wouldn't be sleeping, and then not eating, and then I'd just drink until I crashed."

"If you obey all the rules," Katharine Hepburn said, "you'll miss all the fun." Joe embraced that reasoning. And broke a lot of rules. Nevertheless, his muse would always find him through the maze of empty bottles. And in 1974, the Dial Press published his masterpiece.

Like Paul Simon's *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, *The Forests of the Night* catapulted Joe from prominent to preeminent. To the highest level as a writer. The book, about a Mexican rancher in a battle of wits with a jaguar, debuted to rave reviews. "His new novel is cinematic, gripping and deadly funny," *Kirkus Reviews* proclaimed on September 12, 1974. The late Charles Bowden liked it, too. After reading *The Forests*, along with Joe's first two books, Chuck picked up the phone. "He's the only writer I ever sought out in my life," Chuck said. "I think *The Forests of the Night* is without a doubt the finest novel ever written in our region, and the botanical accuracy of it is stunning. All three of those novels are literally classics. If he never writes another word, he's still created a better body of work than anybody else in the Southwest."

Four decades after *The Forests*, Joe made a long-overdue return to *Arizona Highways*. His first new essay, *The High Lonesome*, was set on the family ranch in Eastern Arizona. "In those days, the place was spotted with dozens of prairie-dog towns," he wrote. "The audacious creatures stood 5 inches tall by their holes with their hands on their chests, looked us in the eye, dared us to attack, and chattered their derision." About the homestead's 10,000-gallon water tank, he wrote: "It provided water for the cattle and a swimming pool for us. The water was so cold and hard that we bounced when we jumped in."

Reading his books and essays is like sitting across the table from him. Two guys having a conversation, one of whom was among the greatest storytellers of his generation. I guess it's fitting that he rode off while we were working on an issue about horses. And life on the range. "I say that cowboys fly," he wrote. "Some fly more often than others, some higher than others, but they all take wing when they find themselves in the big middle of an astoundingly lucky, risky and perfect performance of cowboy skills."

The great writer was a reflection of his own proposition. Lucky, risky, perfect, imperfect ... he gave the performance of a lifetime. But now, I'm sad to say, the show is over. Fly high, Joe Brown. You've got your wings.

— ROBERT STIEVE, EDITOR

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The last trail I hiked for my first hiking book was the Bear Wallow Trail. It was exactly what a final scene is supposed to be. A dramatic culmination of a long endeavor. The zenith of so many miles. Like a trail that meanders through the right brain of Robert Frost, the Wallow was thick with Douglas firs, Engelmann spruce, box elders and quaking aspens. It was arboreal. Beautiful. Maybe the most beautiful trail in Arizona that doesn't end at the top of a mountain or in the bottom of a canyon. It was an adventure, too. Fifteen miles along a perennial creek lined with thorns and poison ivy, a gantlet masterminded by Mother Nature. Despite a couple of shredded legs and a ripped T-shirt, I climbed out of the Wallow exhilarated. The last hike was done.

As it turned out, the euphoria lasted for only 8 miles, the distance between the trailhead and the lodge at Hannagan Meadow. That's where I saw the hotshots converging in the small, gravel parking lot. The Paradise Fire was burning in the adjacent Blue Range, and the only road to the historic lodge was closed in both directions. I didn't mind being "stranded" in the White Mountains, but I was worried that Bear Wallow would go up in flames. That didn't happen, though. Not that time. A year later, however, almost one year to the day, it was lost.

The Wallow Fire started burning on May 29, 2011. A few days later, our publicist called and asked if I could leave that night to do an early morning interview with Rick Reichmuth, the chief meteorologist for Fox News — he was on location in the White Mountains. I got to the satellite truck around 4 a.m. Kelly Vaughn, our senior editor, was with me. She was working on a story about the anniversary of Rodeo-Chediski, which, at the time, was the largest wildfire in Arizona history. That, too, would change.

I did a few segments with Rick. We talked about the places in harm's way: Greer, Alpine, Mount Baldy. And those places at the epicenter: Reno Peak, the Black River, Bear Wallow. We also talked about the dangerous fuel loads in the forests, created by a century of fire suppression. The sun wasn't up yet, but the sky was eerily illuminated by the firestorm around us. And the smoke was like fog, a filter that blurred the shapes of the landscape. I'd been around big fires before, but I didn't have the prerequisites to process the scale of Wallow. Or the associated emotion. You can't equate Engelmann spruce and Douglas firs to the victims of an earthquake or a tornado, but watching the incineration of an old-growth forest brings on a relative sense of despair. It's the grief that comes with knowing things will never be the same. Not in your lifetime. Not in your daughters' lifetime.

The scientists say that fire is a natural phenomenon. That it clears out dead organic material, returns nutrients to the soil

and might even help rid an ecosystem of invasive species. The poets, including Ruth Rudner, say the same thing. "Fire is a force as wild and natural as wolves. It is rebirth."

Ms. Rudner is right. And so are the scientists. But how much fire does the ecosystem need? In the United States, approximately nine out of 10 wildfires are caused by human beings. That's not a natural phenomenon. That's a dramatic escalation beyond what Mother Nature sees as necessary. What's worse, almost all of those man-made fires are fueled by carelessness. That's what happened in Bear Wallow.

At first I was angry — Stage 2 of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross — but now I just feel sorry for the two guys who started the largest wildfire in Arizona history. Clearly, they were fools to walk away from their campfire, but they weren't arsonists. Or ecoterrorists. They were backpackers out doing what so many of us do. Exploring. Breathing the air. Sleeping under the stars. Unfortunately, they forgot to pack their thinking caps, and now the forest that's immortalized in *A Sand County Almanac* has been devastated. Some of it forever.

For their mistake, the two guys will spend the rest of their lives trying to pay off the \$3.7 million they owe in restitution — the U.S. Forest Service agreed to not go after them for the \$79 million it cost to put out the fire. Their real penance, though, is the never-ending nightmare of knowing that their poor judgment has robbed generations of hikers and backpackers the pleasure of experiencing the arboreal nature of Bear Wallow. And knowing that their carelessness has permanently altered a half-million acres in a place that Jo Baeza described as "God's Country" — Ms. Baeza, another poet, knew the White Mountains as well as anyone.

Two years ago, Smokey Bear turned 75. According to the Ad Council, 80 percent of Americans are familiar with his important message. There's no doubt it makes a difference, but when you consider how many wildfires are man-made, you have to wonder why more people aren't listening. The two guys in Bear Wallow certainly weren't. Neither was the seasonal firefighter who intentionally started the Rodeo Fire, hoping he'd get work — instead he got 10 years in prison. And neither was the woman who started the Chediski Fire — in the middle of a brittle forest, she lit a signal fire because she got lost in the woods.

It's hard to understand what these people were thinking, but the message for all of us is clear: *Only you can prevent wildfires.* It's a message that's more important than ever, because what's happening now is not a natural phenomenon. If the forest needs a fire, let Mother Nature be the one to light it.



— ROBERT STIEVE, EDITOR  
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## I was in the morning queue at

Kiva Elementary when my daughter handed me her mask. Like Forrest Gump in Monument Valley, when he suddenly decided to stop running, she was done. She didn't say anything, but her expression was her proxy. *Enough is enough.*

"What's going on, sweetheart?"

"It's not fair, Daddy. Half the kids in my class don't wear masks. Why do I have to?"

*She's right*, I thought, as I tried to muster strength and shutter so many emotions. But there wasn't

time to explain herd immunity. How we're not there yet. And how a mask can help keep her safe. I didn't have to explain it, though. She's smart. And she understands. I think she was just wishful thinking — craving the innocence that kids are supposed to take for granted in the fifth grade. Like the rest of us, she wanted to feel like things were back to normal. But they're not. Because not enough people have been vaccinated.

There are reasons for that. Lack of confidence and complacency among them. And some people just don't like being told what to do. Scientists have a term for it. It's called "psychological reactance." According to Dr. Elizabeth Dorrance, a professor at Michigan State University, it's our brain's response to a threat to our personal freedom. "People who strongly feel reactance," she writes in *Psychology Today*, "feel an urge to do *something*. That something can be restoring one's freedom by rebelling against the advised or prescribed action."

It's human nature, I guess, but sometimes, for the greater good, we do what needs to be done. We stop at red lights, we slow down in school zones, we obey fire restrictions, we sneeze into our elbows. And now, the smartest people in the scientific world are telling us to get vaccinated. For the greater good. Even politicians, from both sides of the aisle, are advocating the jab. But not enough people are listening.

When I sit down to write this column every month, I have no idea what direction it'll take. Like Linus waiting for the Great Pumpkin, I usually stare at the screen for a while, hoping for something to emerge. I suppose I expected to see autumn leaves this time around. Or maybe some flashback to trick-or-treating as a boy. I certainly had no intention of writing about the coronavirus. But then I got an email from photographer Jack Dykinga.

Jack and I had been going back and forth, trying to schedule a podcast interview. I figured his email was a return volley. Instead, he dropped a bomb. "I've been diagnosed with COVID," he wrote. "Just found out and wanted to give you an early warning. I'll be getting intravenous treatment, because of my compromised immune system. Stay tuned."

Those 29 words scared the hell out of me. In 2010, Jack was diagnosed with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, an uninvited

guest that led to a double lung transplant. Just like that, the ominous statistics about "breakthrough COVID" were attached to a name. And it was someone in my family. The next day, Jack opened up:

"We did everything right," he wrote. "We isolated early in 2020, we dutifully wiped down our groceries, and we got two doses of Moderna's vaccine as soon as possible. Yet, during a routine check prior to a procedure at the Norton Thoracic Institute in Phoenix, I learned that I had COVID.

"I was prepped for the procedure when word came that they needed to abort because my test was positive. My wife, Margaret, and I left the operating suite in stunned silence. The only option was to return to the emergency room.

"After approximately two hours, I was ushered to a clothed cubicle in a suite full of desperate people in life-or-death battles that many will lose. It's hard to overstate the trauma of being in the middle of a war, where heroic nurses are doing battle with an unseen enemy. Many of the best have quit with the medical equivalent of PTSD. It's not the COVID, I'm told; it's the apathy of the unvaccinated who fill the wards in a hopeless cycle.

"It's easy to say that people have made bad decisions, and now they're suffering, but when you hear their fear and their humanity as they face the incomprehensible, you realize we must be committed to a universal solution. The thought of a sea of unvaccinated human being hosts fostering yet more variants cannot be an option. Like it or not, we're in this together."

Van Gogh said that "great things are done by a series of small things brought together." Benjamin Franklin was more direct: "We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately."

As I write this, the night's headline delivers the somber news that three Arizona police officers have died this week from complications related to COVID. I don't know whether or not they were vaccinated. But I do know that they're gone. And their friends and families are suffering. And so are so many others. To date, COVID has claimed the lives of 4.3 million people worldwide, including one of my family members in Seattle.

Herd immunity might have saved their lives. It's textbook: "When a large portion of a community becomes immune to a disease," Mayo Clinic says, "it makes the spread of disease from person to person unlikely. And that protects the whole community — not just those who are immune." Unfortunately, we're not there yet.

Meantime, my daughter is still wearing a mask. And doctors and nurses are still risking their lives to save those of others. I tell my daughters there are two ways to be: "You either care about the people you don't know. Or you don't."

I don't know the doctors and nurses who took care of our legendary photographer. But I care about them. And their well-being. And I care about my friends and family, including Jack Dykinga. That's why I'm vaccinated. For the greater good.

— ROBERT STIEVE, EDITOR

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