When Larry Brown died suddenly in 2004 at 53, he left a nearly finished sixth novel, A Miracle of Catfish, that revisits several of his favorite themes: fatherhood, alienation, and loneliness. Shannon Ravenel, Brown’s Algonquin editor, had the daunting task of trimming the enormous manuscript to manageable size, almost impossible for a responsible editor to do without the help of the author. Brown’s prolix, rambling style is at times mesmerizing and at times--just rambling. Brown’s notes at the end show us where the story might have gone, but it does not suffer for being unfinished. Larry Brown definitely knew where he was taking his reader, and Ravenel helped him along. Consideration of the fatherhood theme centers around a man known only as Jimmy’s Daddy, an unregenerate, wretched human being and an ignorant, violent drunkard. His preoccupations, view of women, and treatment of Jimmy might be seen as caricatures if we didn’t know that such people actually exist. Another father, with a much more interesting story, is Cortez Sharp, a farmer in the low hills near Oxford, Mississippi, for nearly fifty years. He has a daughter, Lucinda, living with a retard in Atlanta. The man is a layabout artist who suffers from Tourettes Syndrome, which makes Cortez think that he is simply retarded. Cortez has a deep, dark, guilty secret which is eventually revealed, but the two things that we know about him from the beginning are that he is terribly lonely and is stocking a pond he just had dug with catfish--thousands of catfish. Two minor players are Cleve, a murderous black man who is an occasional employee of Cortez’s and Tommy, who delivers fish to stock Cortez’s pond and owns Ursula, the Mother of all Catfish. Jimmy is the hapless nine-year-old who suffers at the hands of his daddy, and comes to the attention of Cortez who tells him--initially--to get off his property. All of these lives intersect in unexpected ways and are changed by the encounters. Brown writes hell-bent-for-leather in a style uniquely his own which carries the reader along, into landscapes interior and exterior. --Valerie Ryan

My Personal Review:
A Miracle of Catfish is an unabridged audiobook presentation of a countryside novel by Larry Brown, which he completed and sent to his editor shortly before his unfortunate death in 2004. Young Jimmy feels alienated from his cold and distant father, and tries to find a friend in next-door neighbor Cortez who has started to truck in catfish for his new pond. But Cortez is plagued with a tangled mess of difficulties: his contentious daughter has a son with Tourettes; his farm hand might be a murderer; and he keeps a terrible secret hidden away in the barn. Additional notes on the story's ending are included, in this modern-day classic that continues Browns traditional themes of coping with isolation and loneliness, as narrated and performed by professional actor Tom Stechschulte. 15 CDs, 17 1/2 hours.

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