

ON THE FIRST NIGHT IN THEIR VAST NEW APARTMENT ON MANHATTAN'S Upper West Side, in the still-in-boxes corner office that they'll call his writing room from now on, Ron McLarty's wife, Kate, is kneeling on his lap, planting baby kisses on his eyelids. He's keeping her there with a hand on her backside and a bit of sweet talk. They're newlyweds in love. Life couldn't be better.

Especially because now, after more than 30 years of writing longhand five hours a day—after churning out 10 unpublished novels, 44 unpublished plays, hundreds of unpublished short stories, and “an encyclopedia's worth” of unpublished poems—McLarty is finally, *finally* a published novelist. And a millionaire first-time novelist at that. Viking paid “two-point-something” million dollars for *The Memory of Running*, his sentimental picaresque about a fat guy named Smithy who bikes across the country.

“I'm looking at it, I can't believe it's in print,” marvels McLarty, his lap empty, eyeing the copies of *Running* unpacked on his shelf. “I never expected to make a penny from my writing. It gave me a respite from bad times, and it explained the world to me.” He calls his luck “inexplicable.”

True, literary power hitters don't usually fall out of the sky. But EW faithful might recall *Running*: Stephen King declared it “The Best Book You Can't Read” in a 2003 back-page EW column that set off a bidding frenzy among publishers. King was onto *Running* because it began life as an audiobook. McLarty is a not-very-well-known actor, though you might recognize him from *Spenser: For Hire* or *Law & Order* (where the widower met his second wife, actress Kate Skinner). His forte is reading books on tape, and he persuaded Recorded Books to let him record *Running* as a straight-to-audiobook affair in 2000. Then King spun the 12 CDs in his truck stereo, and McLarty's star was born.

“It knocked me out,” says King, who compares it to *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist*, pop books “you can't put down. I was pissed off that it was on CD because I was tied down to that word-by-word narration. I couldn't just read as fast as I could go. Then I put in one of the CDs and that motherf---er started to skip! And I said, ‘You can't do this to me!’”

## Unpublished for 30 years, RON McLARTY is now a millionaire debut novelist, thanks to some help from STEPHEN KING. by Gregory Kirschling

So when seven publishing houses were duking it out over the rights to the novel in 2003, and the increasingly ridiculous money offers kept pouring in (“I don't know how to use a computer,” McLarty laughs, “but I'm a whiz at the fax!”), the author asked each publisher if all this interest was only because Stephen King liked the book. “And more than one said, ‘No, it's just that we wouldn't have read fiction from someone at your age,’” recalls McLarty, who's 57. “Publishers want someone for a long-term career. But you know, they got 10 books right here,” he booms, pointing to manuscripts at his feet, “that they can put out any time they want!”

Meanwhile, he's earning another million writing the *Running* screenplay—he met just yesterday with *Harry Potter 3* helmer Alfonso Cuarón, who's set to produce. “It creeps me out a little bit,” says King. “This is how close it came. The audiobook was rolling around behind the seat of my pickup truck, and if I hadn't picked it up, the book never gets published, probably. Who knows how many others are out there in the same boat?”

“I think my story itself is a hopeful one,” McLarty says, just before heading upstairs to drink wine with Kate in his formidable new home. “I think there are a lot of people who struggle at things and never get recognition. And suddenly they can look at me and say, ‘Hey, it's possible.’” ■

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# THE Running MAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW HETHERINGTON. STYLING: JACQUELINE CHEN. HAIR: JANEY LEVY. MAKEUP: SHARON NICHOLS. GROOMING: JACQUELINE CHEN. DRESS: JANEY LEVY. SHOES: BIRKENSTOCK. BICYCLE: BIRKENSTOCK. BICYCLE: BIRKENSTOCK.



### THE MEMORY OF RUNNING

Ron McLarty  
Debut Novel (Viking, \$24.95)



“A person doesn't get over a family.” This purely phrased truism is at the core of McLarty's captivating novel, and the family is that of Smithson “Smithy” Ide, an alcoholic, overweight Vietnam vet who loses his parents and lovely, psychosis-plagued sister in just one week. A startlingly funny twist of fate sends Smithy riding across the U.S. on his childhood bike, McLarty tracing Smithy's history back as he pedals forward. The people Smithy meets sometimes drift into cliché—the AIDS-ravaged gay florist, the wizened black truck driver—and you wonder why total strangers would so quickly spill their life stories to such a middling jumble of a man. But then McLarty unspools passage after passage of devastating grace and melancholy, and his taciturn hero hooks himself to your heart. **A-** —Adam B. Vary