

## Don Graham Does Cormac Doing Oprah

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Don Graham. *State of Minds: Texas Culture & Its Discontents*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

Having written more than my share of words, sentences, paragraphs, essays and books, what impresses me most, now, is a writer who is able to speak with a really clear and distinctive “voice.” Well, sir, Don Graham, the Frank Dobie Regents Professor of American and English Literature at the University of Texas, has a voice, a Big Texas Voice—in fact, a megaphone. His essay collection *State of Minds* (2011) includes a “letter” he wrote impishly for *Texas Monthly* in 2008, addressed to “Dear Cormac” and signed “your pal, Don,” that may give Cormackians something to chatter about. Graham first praises McCarthy for being reclusive (“Authors are the opposite of children: they should be read and not seen”), then excoriates him for selling out to Oprah. “I know the Oprah thing was about money,” Graham says, “and on one level I certainly don’t hold you, to use one of your favorite words, ‘accountable.’ I personally would crawl to Chicago to be on *Oprah* to sell books. I could hear cash-registers spitting out receipts all over America as Oprah’s followers rushed out to get their kicks on Cormac’s Route 666” (118-19). Well, if that don’t beat the bugs a-fightin’!

Another special treat this book offers for Cormackians—that “loose confederation of enthusiasts, academics, and the curious who pore over Cormackian lore with the zeal of medieval monks”—is Graham’s 2005 review of *No Country for Old Men*, nicely titled “All the Pretty Corpses.” For one thing, Graham knows far more than most readers about Sanderson and Terrell County, Texas. Indeed, it’s his birthright and business. He is a loquacious and severe fact-checker. Ed Tom could not have sent “one boy to the gas chamber in Huntsville,” he informs us, because “That method of execution has never been used at Huntsville” (109). So there, take *that*, Tinhorn! Graham is well informed in other ways, too, and notes the literary antecedents for Anton Chigurh, Judge Holden and Flannery O’Connor’s Misfit, psychopaths all. But good humor predominates in this review: “If they pick Wilfred Brimley to play the old sheriff,” Graham says while noting the adaptive potential for the novel and speculating about possible casting, “I’m never going to the movies again” (111).

Although this review was written in 2005, Graham appends a note after having visited the McCarthy archive at the Alkek Library of Texas State University and examining the manuscript material, including an alternative ending entitled “Prison,” where Ed Tom says of Chigurh, dead in this telling, “I know he’s dead, Doc. I think my problem is I don’t know what it is that died” (115). Don Graham found this “interesting,” because such an ending “would have satisfied those viewers of the film who were disappointed that the good guy didn’t vanquish the bad guy.” But hold on there, partner! Problem is that the alternative ending would have turned a very good novel into a formulaic potboiler unworthy of Cormac McCarthy. Let me explain.

*No Country for Old Men* was adapted to the screen by the Coen Brothers, who later adapted another Western, *True Grit*, from the Charles Portis novel, which, although highly acclaimed, didn’t really come within a country mile of *No Country for Old Men*.

Critics heaped praise on *True Grit*, but one notable exception was Stuart Klawans of *The Nation* (January 24, 2011) who certainly was impressed by the “precision of each setup, camera movement and edit; the faultless modulations of tone among suspense, pathos, humor and excitement, and the utter self-assurance of all the performers.” So what’s missing? “There’s nothing left to brood over after you’ve watched the film—nothing to appreciate more deeply on second or third reflection.” He objects to the “indifferent curiosity with which Joel and Ethan Coen call up and then skim over the themes that have long haunted the western, as if they were mere outmoded superstitions to be ticked off a list.” Klawans concludes that the Coens have finally “achieved the goal toward which their cinema has always tended: a perfect void.”

And he is right. The film is impeccably made, but it simply evaporates at the end. At the end of *No Country for Old Men* there was a sense of mystery and metaphysical malevolence. As Chigurh limped away from that collision, some viewers were angered by the lack of closure; others felt that they had been flimflammed by plot trickery and misled by the ambiguity of soon-to-retire Sheriff Ed Tom’s failed sense of duty. The movie began with a massacre and ended with a mystery, suggesting some of the confusion and lack of clarity one might find in real-life situations. But there is no mystery at the end of *True Grit*, a blood-lusting vigilante story with a mightily smug and tidy conclusion. Would anyone want to bother with seeing it a second time? *No Country for Old Men* almost *demanded* a second viewing, and then a second reading. And *that* is what separates the great from the merely good. And the same logic would also apply to a comparison of the two novels. So, please, let’s not think of changing the ending. McCarthy got it right, all right.