

The Filmed McCarthy Novels, So Far

Jim Welsh

Spurgeon, Sara L., ed. *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses/No Country for Old Men/The Road*. London: Continuum, 2011. 214 pages. Paper, \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-8264-3820-1.

This anthology concerns the three Cormac McCarthy novels that have been adapted to cinema so far—*All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road*. Overall, the focus is on McCarthy the writer, front and center, as it should be as far as I'm concerned. For how important are the films? Billy Bob Thornton and all of his cast and crew seem to agree that the film of *All the Pretty Horses* should have been longer to achieve its goals as an adaptation. See Peter Josyph's *Acting McCarthy* for amplitude on that point. John Hillcoat's *The Road* was an admirable attempt to unfilm the unfilmable; that was the end of *The Road* at the box office. Only the zany-philosophical Coens were able to create a McCarthy hit with *No Country for Old Men*. But the Spurgeon book's discussion of that splendid film has mainly to do with the question of Evil in the world, the tendency to avoid it if possible, and the odd motivation of (especially) Anton Chigurh and Sheriff Ed Tom Bell. Of course. What drives the narrative, anyway?

Evil hovers over the corpus of McCarthy's writings, like a vulture, waiting to descend. At times readers can hear the vulture's wings fanning the flames of hell, and it *is* disturbing. Dan Flory takes poor old Sheriff Ed Tom Bell to the woodshed because his understanding of evil is, well, "unsatisfactory." The film, Flory thinks, performs this service: it "pushes viewers toward the realization that adopting a perspective such as Bell's, that construes this villain [Chigurh] as ultimately incomprehensible, mysterious or demonic, is unsatisfactory, disadvantageous, and puts us at risk in ways that should be avoided" (118).

But for me the puzzle of *No Country for Old Men* is not so much Anton Chigurh's incomprehensible motivation as Bell's tangled logic and diction in the voice-overs (as they function not only in the film, but also in the novel, which is part of the genius of the film, isn't it?). These reveal his motivation, linked to his failing sense of confidence about his ability to do his job in a changing and increasingly puzzling world. For, take it from a geezer, as one ages, the world seems increasingly alien and strange. A place, perhaps, to flee. This seems to me the hidden agenda of Stephen Tatum's essay on "Mercantile Ethics" in *No Country for Old Men*. The odd phrase, "Mercantile Ethics," is quoted from Bell's italicized voice-over reflections linking vanishing manners to the illegal drug industry: "*You finally get into the sort of breakdown in mercantile ethics that leaves people settin around in the desert dead in their vehicles and by then it's just too late*" (80).

The book made me rethink the canonical responses to Cormac McCarthy, his novels, and the film adaptations spawned by these three books: *All the Pretty Horses* is an abomination because the nasty studio wouldn't let Billy Bob have his way. (I rather *like* the film, flaws and all, by the way, but maybe I like the Peter Josyph documentary better?) The oddball treatment the Coen

Brothers gave *No Country for Old Men* is some kind of “perfect” adaptation, according to the box-office receipts and the Motion Picture Academy. *The Road* is of course unfilmable because it takes an unwatchable film to perfectly adapt an unreadable novel, and, besides, disturbing the audience is not exactly the way to sell tickets, even though it somehow managed to sell books. Can the sparseness of the images *begin* to match the sparseness of the diction, or the unutterable mystery that rises from it? After all, “He Ought Not to Have Done It,” a friend’s words spoken about the book version to author Dana Phillips, is the opening part of his title for this compilation’s final chapter. But who is *he* for Phillips? McCarthy? John Hillcoat? Either, or both?

In the interest of clarity, perhaps I should begin again. The Introduction provides a useful context for the novels as McCarthy’s career advances: the first “act” ends with *Blood Meridian*, which takes us into a second “act” that elevates McCarthy from being merely “regional” to “national.” The second “act” then ends with the Border Trilogy, which some critics thought would also end McCarthy’s career—until the publication of *No Country for Old Men* in 2005, which introduces a third “act.” *No Country for Old Men* crosses stylistic and generic borders, as well as international ones. Some greeted it as a *noir* Western, but John Cant couldn’t and considered it merely a “crime novel” akin to the work of Chandler, Hammett, and James M. Cain. But wait: none of McCarthy’s characters speak like the lowlifes of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* or the pathetic, grubby strivers of *Mildred Pearce*. No (or maybe *Yes?*), McCarthy seems to have created a new fictive hybrid, but to me it seems a promising post-Western update with inexplicable *noir* nastiness. *The Road* then follows in this third “act,” leading us into even stranger and more difficult and disturbing territory.

The Road begins Part III (Act III?) of the anthology. Susan Kollin attempts a comparison to John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* and offers a charming ecological essay on kudzu, Asia’s exfoliating gift to the American Southland. In *The Road* she finds—unsurprisingly—“even less of the guarded optimism that shaped Steinbeck’s text” (171). Well, yes. Dana Phillips mentions Henry James and Ernest Hemingway without dwelling or doting on them and burrows instead into McCarthy’s text. Phillips finds inspiration by quoting the excellent critic James Wood, who describes McCarthy’s style as “sagely humdrum” (which I might emend to “savagely humdrum”). The father is laconic, the son even more, like a miniature mute who might have migrated from a Beckett drama. But there isn’t much to talk about in the novel’s desiccated world as it moves from banality to grotesquerie. Both McCarthy and Beckett are dancing around the edges of absurdity, giving witness to a pared-down language and landscape (have you seen *Godot* lately?), protesting gradations of spiritual emptiness while criticism sputters desperately about “theodicy. . . a defense of the goodness of God in the light of the reality of evil” (179).

Phillips’s essay is perhaps most impressive in the way it reaches back to Sartre and to Frank Kermode’s book *Sense of an Ending*, published forty years ago, and its reflections on novelistic form, leading to the question of whether or not *The Road* should even be considered a “novel,” much less a film.

The authors mull over complexity satisfactorily in roughly two-thirds of the essays, and that is reason enough, surely, to purchase the book, either for your own puzzlement or for your students' enlightenment at the library. This book follows the one edited by Lynnea Chapman King, Rick Wallach, and me on the dual incarnations of *No Country for Old Men* in 2009, which like this one included Linda Woodson and Stacey Peebles as contributors. More similar books are sure to come, to help those of us who like Ed Tom Bell are grasping to find light in darkness, or maybe to make darkness visible.