

Parrish, Timothy. *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008. 308 pages. Paper, \$28.95, ISBN 978-1-55849-627-9.

Wallis Sanborn

What does a postmodernist history look like? In genre? In content? In argument? Is Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* a postmodernist history? In Timothy Parrish's *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction*, Parrish contends that "postmodernist histories have already been written and are being written by novelists" (17). Parrish's thesis is based on a number of sub-claims, heretofore argued and not. First, he contends that history is a narrative art, and that the "history" of the United States is not a unified history, as told by the historians who present *ad nauseum* the Founding Father type of popular histories that fill the best-seller lists. While these sub-claims are not new, what is new is Parrish's claim that American History, as a literary genre, has failed to evolve narratively since the Linguistic, Interpretive, and Rhetorical Turn(s) of Saussure, Semiotics, and Structuralism, and then, of Derrida and Poststructuralism. With Structuralism and Poststructuralism, Parrish notes, "academic readers [in the Humanities, excluding History] came to understand works of literature as exercises in writing that communicated an endless play of potential—but never fixed—meanings" (9). Further, he points out that the "realistic narrative model has been a museum piece since James Joyce" (19). Finally, per accepted postmodern theory, Parrish adds that history grand or finite can never be told objectively or non-ideologically (17). As such, "objective," chronologically-told histories of the popular sort are merely proto-modern realist narratives—fictions yet—that have failed to truth-tell or to evolve narratively, structurally, theoretically, or ideologically since the middle of the nineteenth century. The result is that the linear realistic narrative histories of the modern and postmodern eras exist as no more than anachronistic, out-of-genre, inaccurate, incomplete, and *passé* attempts at truth-telling; as Parrish argues, "contemporary popular historians have been working over the genre of nineteenth-century realist fiction and marketing it as history" (16). However, postmodern novelists have used—and are using—the construct of the postmodern novel as the optic through which history can be known and worthily preserved. Therefore, per Parrish's defining characteristics, *Blood Meridian* is indeed a postmodernist history, a novel-history.

Parrish argues that the proper postmodern historical and literary experience is a communal, rather than individual, experience. That said, the texts through which Parrish frames his argument "identify communities (rather than atomistic individuals) that are at odds with traditional presentations of American history that are represented" in academic and popular histories (37). These traditional histories promote and disseminate the Ethos—and brutality—of American Imperialism. Conversely, Parrish's postmodern novel-histories argue against the blind acceptance of the hegemonic American over-history and argue for an ongoing and lasting historic "communal identity creation" that will posit a "lasting record of a specific community's past" (37)—for example, the antebellum racially integrated scalphunters in

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* or the post-bellum Anglo Southerners in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* or the post-emancipation African Americans in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The result is a novel-history that recalls a particular past in order to reconcile it and its community with the present in order to influence the future. While Parrish's theses are cogent and rationally acceptable, from the perspective of a critic of postmodern literature, it is problematic to dismiss an entire discipline, its history, and its body of work. As well, Parrish seems to exclude New Historicist readings in favor of a blanket condemnation of Historicist readings. Also problematic is the issue of historical inaccuracy in the fictional texts. Who is to say if any given novel-history is an accurate one or one revisionist in its portrayal of historical "fact"? Like historians, novelists can also be guilty of subjectivity in their interpretations of history, and bias is as bias does. However, of course, bias does not necessarily equate to inaccuracy, and so Parrish chooses among the pillars of American High Modernism and Postmodernism to present, apply, and argue his theses.

In "*Absalom, Absalom!: William Faulkner's True History of the South*," Parrish posits that Faulkner's High Modern classic—the apex of American literary modernism and structurally a transitional and proto-postmodern text—does not repudiate slavery and institutional racism, as is commonly argued, but in fact, promotes the ongoing existence and propagation of an anti-"American," pro-Southern social order that denies the existence of a unified American history because those involved and subjugated to that history, the post-bellum community of Anglo Southerners, deny the efficacy of said American history. Regardless of the outcome of the US Civil War, the secessionist ideology lives on because the community that believes in the ideology, implicitly or explicitly, lives on. Therefore, paradoxically, Quentin Compson's suicide is not an act of defeat but is an act of defiance, one that conjoins Quentin with his not-so-defeated community of antebellum philosophers. Quentin—among others—narrates his community's history, and in so doing, propagates the continuation of that particular, non-"American," history. After doing so, and having served his narrative and historical purpose, Quentin is free to become one with his community's history. Parrish argues that Faulkner uses multiple narrators in order to "define history as a set of conflicting propositions rather than as a listing of coherent 'facts,'" which shows that "an easy distinction between history (facts) and fiction (narrative invention) is precisely what *Absalom* suggests cannot be sustained" (45).

What does sustain and unify the text and its multiple narrators is the communal over-story, that of an anti-"American," post-bellum South, constitutionally bound to the United States yet philosophically and historically fractured from its nation. For Faulkner, and central to Parrish's text-wide argument, history (facts) and fiction (narrative invention) are NOT distinct entities. So while *Absalom, Absalom!* is a High Modern text, perhaps *the* High Modern American text, it is the seminal novel-history by which Parrish defines his argument.

In stark and ongoing opposition to the community of the Anglo Southerner is the community of the post-emancipation African American. In "Off Faulkner's Plantation: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*," Parrish offers the Morrison texts, with emphasis on *Beloved*, as "a refutation of Faulkner the historian" (118). Parrish argues that with *Beloved*, Morrison is critiquing previously written history—*Absalom, Absalom!*—while creating a particular living communal history from the optic of members of that

community. For Morrison, histories such as Faulkner's deny and limit African Americans' communal past, present, and future, as well as deny them their own identity. Morrison expresses through her text(s) that African American history is its own history, an outsider history that does not share the same ideals and past and present, and perhaps future, with the meta-American version of history, Faulkner's history. As a slave, then escaped slave, then emancipated American, Sethe is a transitional figure, a metonymous link to a particular community's past and present, so Parrish argues that Morrison uses Sethe to create a "healthy communal history" (149) to overcome the false meta-history that denies African Americans their proper place and role. As such, an ancestral role is created for the post-emancipation African American community, one through which it can exorcise the false history, or non-history, created through Anglicized meta-"American" histories such as Faulkner's. Interestingly, Parrish is using *Absalom, Absalom!* as a seminal text, specific to its own outsider community and to Parrish's critical ends, while also using Faulkner's work as an authoritative "American" history in opposition to Morrison's text. By doing so, Parrish shows that a history—and therefore all histories—can be outsider, communal, inclusive, and "true," while it can also be insider, mass, exclusive, and untrue. Faulkner's and Morrison's novel-histories each use non-linear narrative, fractured chronology, and multiple narrators, yet each work uses fiction—content—to tell its own true history of its own outsider community, and as such (and perhaps paradoxically) each text successfully supports Parrish's arguments.

Of particular interest to Cormac McCarthy scholars is Parrish's chapter on McCarthy's masterwork *Blood Meridian*, "Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*: The First and Last Book of America." Parrish argues that McCarthy's work is trans-historical in its epic use of violence as a conjunctive device linking not only the European to the non-European but also the birth of the United States with its eventual end: "*Blood Meridian* depicts American history as a series of violent encounters and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to establish a history other than the murderous one implied when the 'civilized' Europeans enslaved or eradicated the 'savages' they encountered" (85). American history is a series of violent acts, and violence is its own means, its own end, its own device of generation and regeneration, and in the history of the United States, there is no unifying historical movement other than violence. As Parrish observes, "Violence and [American] culture are coextensive," and only when American history is ended will the violence end (84). This is no new argument, though, either in historical studies or in McCarthy studies. It is commonly known and argued by social, historical, and literary critics that the United States was born of and grown upon a diet of perpetual, cyclical violence. More interesting, though, Parrish also argues that *Blood Meridian* is a meta-text in that it encompasses all violent empires and "all possible empires" and their use of violence to subjugate peoples, cultures, and societies other than themselves and their own (116). Parrish rightly sees violence as a socially-sanctioned humanistic device that is trans-national, trans-cultural, trans-communal, and trans-historical, and while *Blood Meridian*'s focus is on a racially integrated community composed of Anglo-Americans, African-Americans, and American Indians who kill Mexicans, Anglo-Americans, Apache, and other "indigenous" peoples, the work is but a page in the text that is man's never-ending opus of violence: "History creates itself through acts of endless violation of others and the stories that humans write to affirm or counteract the memory of those acts" (114). So, with *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy is not just creating

history—“American” history specifically, and human history more generally—through writing these acts of endless violation, but he is also affirming history.

In addition to the aforementioned texts, Parrish examines and critiques a number of other postmodern novel-histories: Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, Joan Didion’s *Democracy*, Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, and Denis Johnson’s *Fiskadoro*. Parrish sees Pynchon’s text as a parody of contemporary narrative histories, one that “presents a critique of [American] history and its reliance on slavery and the oppression of minority ‘others’ that complements and extends Morrison’s critique of Faulkner” (41). Further, Pynchon’s text shows American history to be a conflagration of Enlightenment era science and European conquest philosophy that resulted in a practice of slaughter and domination. Parrish uses Didion’s *Democracy* and DeLillo’s *Underworld* to show how capitalist and government entities use modernist narrative strategies and mass media technological devices to numb and coerce the anesthetized populace into believing propaganda marketed as contemporary and past history. For Didion, the past—i.e., history—does not exist except as a created entity put forth through federally influenced corporate media—television, movies, advertising. For DeLillo, in the postmodern era, representation replaces reality (212), and a willing public accepts representation over reality, as if the representation were a true event. Further, in *Democracy* and in *Underworld*, the fictional narratives disseminated to the accepting, unquestioning public become narrative realities replacing actual contemporary and historical events. Finally, Parrish uses Johnson’s text as a unifying, prescient “history” of a post-United States that is post-Anglo, post-postmodern, post-nuclear, and post-national. Parrish posits that Johnson’s claim in *Fiskadoro*—one that returns the reader to Parrish’s claim, of course—is that “narrative orders the world” that one knows or claims to know, that narrative has the power to compel belief, and that history “can be only the story that you believe to be true” (233).

From the Civil War to the Apocalypse is a well-written, well-argued text and a welcome addition to postmodern theory. The work is, however, not without its typographical flaws. Unfortunately, a number of type-setting and proofreading errors are found in the first third of the text (10, 20, 22, 35, 39, 45, 74, 115), and while the presence of these accidental variants does not detract from Parrish’s central claims, the presence of such does create unneeded interruption and distraction. Additionally, the text seems to be missing—other than in brief intra-chapter asides used in the Introduction and in Chapters 2 and 3 to build and facilitate chapter theses—a particular author and text of note: Leslie Marmon Silko and her magnum opus, *Almanac of the Dead*. Because Parrish refers to Silko and this text a number of times in his work (34-35, 98, 118-20, 123, 124-25), perhaps a chapter-length treatment of the Silko would have been relevant to the text and to Parrish’s argument, as Silko’s text does present an “alternative” (35), communal history that is, doubtless, worth preserving. Nonetheless, as a comprehensive theoretical and critical work, Parrish’s book properly builds upon the foundation created by Hayden White, Linda Hutcheon, Julia Kristeva, Brian McHale, et al.

Lincoln, Kenneth. *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 193 pages. paper, \$27.00. ISBN 978-0230612266.

Mike Fonash

Kenneth Lincoln, well-known for his extensive writings involving Native American Literatures, returns his focus to the world of contemporary American fiction in his recent study *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles*. Unlike any other McCarthy critic up to this point, Lincoln offers an alternative intertextual reading that configures McCarthy's fictions as holding a firm position in the tradition of the great tales of not only America, but the tradition of the Classics as well. Lincoln's book does not view McCarthy's writing as postmodern patch-work, thus killing off the author, or as authoritative historical narratives, but instead as tales being told within and to be read alongside the cohesive panoply of the greater narrative tradition.

During an epoch of reading that relies too heavily on the modern politics of moral justice and bottomless historically-driven exegesis, an astute reader is left with little choice but to view the inclusion of Cormac McCarthy's fictions in the overall university system as an aberration: seemingly bestial, Old Testament brutality and butchery with a brand of justice borrowed from the spectacular eschatological myths from the ages and classic cultures. The modern brand of human justice is never served in McCarthy, if in fact justice is allowed even a minimal say in his fictions. Consequently, to the readers of our age, McCarthy is an apparent profligate.

Sentimentality, which has become commonplace for the multitudes and reviewers, and the myriad historicisms driven by the many political agendas and languages litter the current topography of McCarthy readings in popular media reviews and academic writing. As opposed to these agenda-driven studies composed by those in search of political succor who cringe at the arrival and impending violence of the real, Lincoln's cogent study of McCarthy's writings bluntly considers the politically futile, blood-soaked, hopeless fictions, including both McCarthy's dramas and novels in their sequential publication order, to open up discussion addressing the violence and unresolved injustices of modern existence alongside the great traditional writings. Most important, Lincoln does so without using the worn out modern tools of Freud and Marx and their postmodern progeny.

The introductory chapter "Canticles Down West: Hyperrealism," employs an etymological study to reclaim the term "hyperreal" from such influential contemporary thinkers such as Baudrillard, Eco, and Deleuze (to name a few); it then uses biblical prophecy and other classic and modern writers to establish McCarthy as a writer composing "threnodies" for those who remain humanists. Each proceeding chapter is dedicated to each of McCarthy's works up to *The Road*, McCarthy's most recent publication.

Reading McCarthy with the assistance of the great human narratives which involves interlacing McCarthy's formal style, language, character, and themes with other worldly epochs and writings, ranging from the works of Homer to St. John the Divine and forward to Balzac through Joyce, Lincoln asks his reader to step beyond the historical and biographical into a more chaotic and less recognizable world. Many other

well known names emerge in the process, not to create tangential readings of McCarthy, but with the intent of underscoring cohesive and soul-emboldening readings. One weakness in this study consists of the numerous references to other writers that seem to demand more explicated connections to McCarthy. But as Lincoln has claimed to me, “The mention of other writers is an attempt to place McCarthy in a modern literary context, as well as an historical tradition. He's too often seen as a literary outlaw, rather than a serious reader who references the Old Testament, Homer, Shakespeare, Joyce, Yeats, and a raft of 20th-century masters. But he's not for the masses, nor does he curry favor with the light-hearted.”

Lincoln's critical ideas are original but cannot be considered either overbearingly spontaneous or formulaic, since they do not adhere to the usual academic standard. Playfully referred to as a man of “contemporary masculine studies” by his UCLA coworkers, Lincoln never establishes a hierarchy for or makes an argument favoring male or female, metaphysically liberal or conservative; his only concern is the human, which could be one of the most useful explanations why Lincoln eschews the modern critical leveling ideologies and writing forms and styles currently so popular within the greater portion of McCarthy studies. In fact, at a recent symposium for *American Canticles* held at UCLA, Lincoln made sure to include in his closing statements that “people kill each other with knives and guns” in an attempt to communicate the imminence of real and the unavoidable violence. Lincoln acknowledges this inescapable violence by respectively placing McCarthy in the context of the classic fictions of the ancient writers and of the moderns who decided to move forward in accepting life and reality on its own terms, which includes unavoidable, real violence.

The prose of this study is neither jargon-laden, nor is it delivered in the style of cold, technical writing. Rather, Lincoln's voice sounds strongly in his style. Nonetheless, Lincoln's voice and style may frustrate and thwart some readers because neither is as scientifically objective or ideologically familiar as many may desire or expect out of a UCLA professor with more than 35 years experience. Lincoln employs a William Carlos Williams quotation to lay bare his intent in incorporating his writing style for this unorthodox study: “Such must be the future: penetrant and simple—minus the scaffolding of the academic” (1).

No doubt to the chagrin of many academics, Lincoln states that he's “come to hedge writers on writers over the literary pundits, to avoid academic in-groups, to take the characters and stories clean, to trust my own hunches” (1). In addition to putting together one of the earliest synoptic studies of the standing McCarthy canon, Lincoln authors an introduction in this text that connects McCarthy's fiction to the wide range of human narratives, and he does so with ontological relevance exhibited by few other McCarthy critics.

Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009. 205 pages. Hardcover, \$39.95, ISBN 978-1-57003-839-6.

Capper Nichols

Towards the end of this satisfying book, Steven Frye quotes McCarthy, from the 1992 Robert Woodward interview: “‘There’s no such thing as life without bloodshed.... I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way ... is a really dangerous idea’” (159). Throughout his book, Frye acknowledges the bloodiness of McCarthy’s literary landscape—and calls it one of the “formidable” challenges of reading the author. But he argues that McCarthy is “by no means devoid of hope” (5). On the contrary, according to Frye, he is a writer seeking truth and value, creating characters who won’t succumb to despair but persist in quests for meaning. Frye seeks to guide the reader through the McCarthian darkness, analyzing the works in clear and rigorous prose, and arguing for the potential for heroism in a bleak, violent world.

The book is an entry in the *Understanding Contemporary American Literature (UCAL)* series. According to Matthew Bruccoli, the series editor, these books are meant to provide “instruction in how to read certain contemporary authors—identifying and explicating their material, themes, use of language, point of view, structures, symbolism, and responses to experience” (Preface). Bruccoli identifies the specific audience as “students as well as good nonacademic readers.” But after reading the McCarthy volume, I wondered: What sort of students? Though a motivated undergraduate might find *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* useful, Frye’s primary audience seems to be more experienced scholars. This work is readable and engaging survey, but it’s also complex and sophisticated, and might be best appreciated by those committed readers who have put in substantial time with McCarthy.

Concerning the *UCAL* series, it seems strange that a McCarthy entry comes out only at the end of 2009. Earlier in the year volumes on T.C. Boyle and Lorrie Moore appeared; Tim O’Brien got his in 1995, Bobbie Ann Mason hers in 2000. Many writers who began publishing around the same time as McCarthy have previously made it in too: Thomas Pynchon in 1986, John Barth in 1990, Toni Morrison in 1999, and Robert Coover in 2003. Why did it take so long, especially for a series published by a Southern press, to get to Cormac McCarthy? But perhaps after all the timing is useful, as Frye is able to finish his book with a chapter titled “The Later Works,” in which he takes up *The Sunset Limited* (very briefly), *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*.

Frye begins his book with an effective introductory chapter, “Understanding Cormac McCarthy,” which provides useful context and identifies key ideas and themes. Subsequent chapters are titled “The Southern Works,” “Into the West: *Blood Meridian*,” “The Border Trilogy,” and the previously noted “The Later Works.” Within the chapters covering multiple works, each novel has its own subsection. And each of the ten novels warrants full critical treatment (if inevitably *Blood Meridian* receives more attention than any other single work). The discussion of each individual work follows a similar format or trajectory: first a general assessment, then a rundown of numerous of the reviews

published when the work appeared, next a plot summary, and, last and longest, Frye's close, detailed reading.

The accounts of contemporary reviews are an appealing part of the exegesis, and over the course of the book Frye effectively traces how contemporary responses evolved, linking reviews from one work to the next. But it's curious that he almost completely ignores the substantial body of subsequent McCarthy criticism. Including such scholarship would have required broadening the scope of what is, admittedly, a comprehensive overview as well as a fairly short work (179 smallish pages of text). But it should be noted that Frye does append an extensive "Selected Bibliography."

The volume includes very little biographical information or analysis, besides a two-page "Life and Career" section in the opening chapter. However, Frye does devote substantial attention to McCarthy's literary and cinematic influences. He claims that McCarthy "dismantles and reconfigures" the King James Bible and Shakespeare's tragedies, and he links the author to the southern grotesque, Faulkner in particular. He invokes Sergio Leone, Sam Peckinpah, and Clint Eastwood, and describes the frontier romance as a means for McCarthy to "explore the human potential for violence, avarice, blindness, self-gratification, and depravity" (10). Most important for Frye, he connects McCarthy's novels to the philosophical narratives of Melville and Dostoyevsky. In particular, he ties *Blood Meridian* to *Moby-Dick* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, arguing that the three novels "share a preoccupation with unanswerable questions related to the existence, nature, and role of the divine, as well as with the possibility of transcendence through human action and benevolence" (79).

Throughout his book, Frye insists that McCarthy is "a novelist of religious feeling" (echoing Robert Coles). Yet he also claims McCarthy is deeply skeptical about conventional religion and the possibilities of redemption. Instead, according to Frye, McCarthy's literary worldview is panentheistic (following a claim McCarthy scholar Edwin T. Arnold has made previously): "the theory or belief that God encompasses and interpenetrates the universe but at the same time is greater and independent of it" (63). Frye links this concept of the divine to the Existential Christianity of Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky and Tillich, describing it as an unflinching and unsentimental theology, one that can contain both human hope and human brutality.

The critical challenge Frye takes on is to somehow hold together hope and violence as they play out in McCarthy's work. He readily acknowledges that reconciliation is not an option. And he forthrightly describes violence in the novels as "a reality endemic to the world's existence." But he further argues that "meaning, purpose, and value" *may* be found—though they "must be sought in darkness" (8). Thus while Judge Holden is a "symbol of the expression of evil," the kid acts as a "heroic counterbalance" (87).

Frye best describes the persistence of hope in discussing the Border Trilogy, in particular *All the Pretty Horses*, the section that strikes me overall as the most successful portion of the book. Frye writes that in the novel McCarthy "retains his stark vision of blood and reverence," but adopts a "more moderate tone and a clearer sense of hope" (97). Yes, the old social order is being, indeed has been, destroyed—replaced by the "inexorable forces of the postnuclear world." But John Grady Cole's "rich interiority, his reflection on hope and possibility" reveals an essential human decency, in the face of, or alongside of, a deep skepticism about human nature in general.

Later in the book, in the section on *The Road*, I found a similar argument less convincing, though only when Frye claims, "the novel is a narrative of the soul's nature," exploring "the soul's capacity to transcend" (166). Throughout most of his work, in discussing *Blood Meridian* and the kid for example, Frye more convincingly tethers the possibilities of transcendence to the context of "observable extremes of human violence and the brutal deterministic forces of the natural world" (67). Invoking the "soul" seems to underestimate the influence of those forces. In this disagreement I may be unduly influenced by the ending of the film version of *The Road*, which to my mind substantially alters the novel's ambiguous conclusion: in the film the boy is snugly folded into the arms of a nuclear family, dog included—redeeming what Frye calls the father's "self-sacrifice." But the film also seemingly ignores that the earth is still a dead planet.

To be fair, Frye's assessment of the novel is much more nuanced than that of the film's screenwriter. And with minor exceptions, he argues convincingly for the importance and persistence of hope in McCarthy's work, doing an exceptional job of describing the shape that hope takes in the novels. He provides complex and satisfying readings not only of McCarthy's "decent" characters—especially the kid and John Grady Cole and Billy Parham—but also of the not so hopeful ones—Judge Holden most memorably. On the whole he makes a rigorous and persuasive argument for a "balance" in McCarthy's novels between the "brute reality of an indifferent world" and the "redemptive power of community and human intimacy" (179).

***The Road*. Dir. John Hillcoat. Perf. Viggo Mortenson, Cody Smit-McPhee. Charlize Theron, Robert Duvall. Dimension Films, 111 minutes.**

Mark Busby

Since you're reading this review in the *Cormac McCarthy Journal*, it is beside the point to tell you, as I have urged my non-Cormackian friends, to read the book before you see the film version of McCarthy's *The Road*. When books are made into movies, I often tell people to remember that each is a different medium and to take each work as a separate artistic product to be judged on its own terms. And even while I try to follow my own advice, I believe that for those who have read the book and have a strong attitude about it, as I'm sure you have, Director John Hillcoat's *The Road* is a fine adaptation that focuses on the fundamental strengths of McCarthy's novel and mostly gets them right.

For me, the most compelling part of McCarthy's works is the way that positive and negative forces intertwine to present a worldview that ultimately suggests a nihilistic optimism. While *The Road* moves away from the Border and returns to McCarthy's roots in the Piedmont East, the geographical specificity is blurred in the novel, almost insignificant because the story is universalized. In the film, the visuals of a destroyed urban landscape along with maps of the east coast place the action more precisely than the novel does. Still, the novel and the film travel the oxymoronic landscape of McCarthy's earlier work. Both McCarthy's novel and Hillcoat's film present journeys through a post-apocalyptic, nihilistic world of soot and ash leading finally to a brightly human, compassionate, and paradoxical world where the conclusion of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* obtains: "They can't go on; they went on."

The heart of the novel is the father's relationship with his son, and in the film Viggo Mortensen as the father and Kodi Smit-McPhee as the son capture the bonds of the father-son relationship in a moving and believable way. McCarthy, of course, makes it clear from the beginning of the novel by dedicating it to his own young son, "John Francis McCarthy," that this connection underpins the novel. The film follows the novel's main narrative, which asks what the world would be like after a holocaust (and neither makes it clear if it's from a nuclear explosion, meteor strike, or some other catastrophe). How might anyone survive? In deft touches, McCarthy sketches and suggests the answers.

The man sees and hears the explosions the night the clocks stop at 1:17, and then he fills the tub with water. Afterward, the world moves well beyond *Mad Max* and *Road Warrior* because it is a world with no electricity, no living plants, birds, or animals, and only a veiled gray sun, hardly visible. Marauders travel together carrying pipes covered with leather and makeshift knives and spears shaped from old vehicle springs and strike with shaped quivers and handmade arrows. The man and his son see a sputtering truck as survivors fight for any remaining fuel to be salvaged from service station storage tanks or gas cans tucked away in storm cellars long ago. Their finding a supply of rusted, swelling canned goods is like discovering Eden. The film's emphasis on cannibalism seems stronger and more ominous in some ways than the novel's. The narrative's fleeting characters portrayed in the film, such as the elderly Ely (Robert Duvall) and the family

man who finds them at the end (Guy Pearce) are more distinctive than they are in the novel, while Charlize Theron as the mother seems less substantial than the novel's character. However, young Smit-McPhee strongly resembles her and presents a fine debut performance.

McCarthy's spare prose in the novel recalls his strong forebear, Ernest Hemingway, so it is not surprising to find that the boy calls his father "Papa" throughout the novel and the film, while we never learn either character's given name. Hemingway's ghost hovers behind the narrative, especially Papa's classic story, "Big Two-Hearted River," with its post-apocalyptic imagery as Nick Adams travels through a burned-out forest on his fishing trip as he attempts to recover from the psychological wound he suffered in what Hemingway's readers know was the trauma of World War I. McCarthy's paradisiacal imagery in the novel echoes Hemingway's fishing metaphors in the conclusion of *The Road*, one of the most moving and powerful scenes in the short history of 21st century American fiction. But the film mutes or omits these allusions, offering no voice-over with McCarthy's concluding lines.

The Road also evokes another famous novel into film, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, another road novel that has a post-apocalyptic tone, where the dust-filled air obscures the sun and where faceless men drive others to seek survival however they can. McCarthy also echoes Steinbeck's conclusion where a woman suckles an unrelated dying man to suggest collective compassion in a forsaken land with a similarly compassionate and loving woman who says to the boy "that the breath of God was his breath though it pass from man to man through all of time." Again, the film mutes the connections that are more explicit in the novel.

It is what's left out that readers of the novel sense, like having feeling in an amputated limb, that the film, despite the elisions, can summon for those who have read the book. And in this way the film elicits some of the same powerful feelings as McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel does.

And that's not a small achievement.

But those viewers who haven't read the novel may recoil from the gray desperation that the visual power of the film makes real. To them the story's jeremiadic presentation is untempered nihilism from which many simply wish to turn away. To which I say: read the book.

***The Road*. Dir. John Hillcoat. Perf. Viggo Mortenson, Cody Smit-McPhee. Charlize Theron, Robert Duvall. Dimension Films, 111 minutes.**

Cynthia Miller

“If I were God, I would have made the world just so, and no different.”

Death is an impersonal reality; everything that lives will, one day, meet its end. The struggle to persist, however, is a deeply personal reality—a passionate one—animated by anger, hope, fear, and longing, the stuff of which humanity is made. The juxtaposition of these two, the personal and the impersonal, provides the visual language through which director John Hillcoat crafts his adaptation of Cormac McCarthy’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road* (2006).

The film, adapted by screenwriter Joe Penhall, opened to limited U.S. release on November 25, 2009, starring Viggo Mortensen as the Father, Kodi Smit-McPhee as The Boy, Robert Duvall as Ely, and Charlize Theron as the Mother. It joins *All the Pretty Horses* (2000) and the Academy Award-winning *No Country for Old Men* (2007) as recent high-budget efforts to adapt McCarthy’s writing to film.

Like the novel, the film’s narrative follows the post-apocalyptic journey of a father and son, southward, through a dying world, in search of continued existence, or at least something larger than the intimate world the two of them have created. The film works on several levels to examine human relationships and responsibilities. Most visibly, our relationship with the environment is called into question, set as it is in an imaginative time when a devastated earth can no longer support life. The narrative of the journey invokes Atomic Age fears of nuclear holocaust—less a fear of death than of living on, isolated and alone—yet, at the same time, it also conveys more contemporary fears of global warming and other human-wrought environmental catastrophes, which would shred the fabric of everyday life and strip away our illusions of mastery over nature.

Yet like the novel, the film offers no explanation for the almost utter destruction of the earth. The cinematic death of the planet is given form through images of ravaged and gasping landscapes of the present-day United States, an eerie warning that the distance between real and fictional disasters is not so great. We follow the father and son as they walk south, always south, through an unspecified geography, signposted with occasional references to people and places long vanished. Much has been written about landscape imagery in the literary version of *The Road*, and the sense of place it engenders.ⁱ The film adaptation, however, leaves less room for interpretation. As the world dies around the father and son, the ground trembles, trees uproot, fires ignite with a seeming randomness, and the air is thick with smoke and ash—McCarthy’s sense-imagery, given form (“The grainy air. The taste of it never left your mouth.”)ⁱⁱ Natural disaster sites, such as post-Katrina New Orleans and distressed areas around Mount St. Helens provide many of these backdrops, but human devastation also plays a significant role, depicted through desolate images of violently used landscapes—abandoned coal mines, surface mines, and coal dumps—drawn from mining districts in central Pennsylvania. Eight miles of abandoned turnpike in Breezewood, PA, provided images that would become iconic of the Road, for the film crew, and later, the film’s audiences.

Only slightly more subtly, the film continues McCarthy's unblinking look at interpersonal relationships, in both their flaws and their triumphs. The father begins as a man whose deep sensitivity and hopefulness tears at his pregnant and despondent wife. Once radiant, the light of her humanity is extinguished by fear and hopelessness over what it means to be alive in a dying world. The birth of her son—traditionally considered the ultimate act of hope—is engulfed in a despair that begins her muffled cry for the release of death.

“My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born”

The wife and mother fears the futility and horror that has come to define their existence, as she argues for a family suicide. In a final outburst of rage, when the father rejects the idea, she shouts, “I should empty every bullet in this place into my head and leave you with nothing!” From then on, her eyes grow hollow and dark, her affect becomes flat, and even anger demands more than she has to give.

Through her descent into despair and the action that follows, we see it is the father who “carries the fire” of faith and hope in the face of overwhelming disaster. Throughout the journey with his son, it is the father who struggles for persistence, not only of his family—his genetic line—but also of humanity. Over the course of the film, as his drive to protect the former increases, his protection of the latter diminishes. Ragged and slowly dying, coughing up blood, he carries less of “the fire” the longer he is on the road. As his encounters with others on the road become increasingly callous, angry, and violent, the camera, which previously located the father's struggle and emotion in each line of his face, now denies us access to his facial expressions, placing less visual emphasis on the complexity of his humanity, and greater emphasis on the broader picture of his actions, lending truth to the words of an old man they meet, Duvall's Ely: “Whoever made humanity will find no humanity here, no sir.” Only in surrendering to the finality of death does the father regain that humanity, as he tearfully acknowledges his love for the boy he must now leave alone in the world.

“You have my whole heart. You always did.”

In the final tortured exchange between father and son, the dying man tearfully resists the boy's pleas to “take me with you.” Unable to end his son's life (“I thought I could, but I can't”), he instructs him to continue on, go south, and do just as they've always done. He transfers the gun, with just one real bullet left, to his son like a sacred charge: “Don't let anyone take it from you.”

Hillcoat's notes on the production cite this scene as the culmination of a “mythic, metaphoric journey of the soul, a fable, an adult fairytale about the passing of one generation to another.”ⁱⁱⁱ In this sense, the cinematic gun takes on far greater significance than its literary counterpart—serving as a torch, passed from father to son—not merely the symbol of one generation giving way to the next, but a transfer of responsibility, manhood, agency. But the “fire”—the true manifestation of those elements—was passed, almost imperceptibly, much earlier along the road. As the father's humanity declined, the son's takes form. Throughout the film, the boy searches for a foothold in the shifting morality around him, asking “Are we still the good guys?” The boy's childhood

sensitivity develops into compassion with each encounter along the road, and his resolve to translate that compassion into action deepens. When they meet the elderly Ely, the boy urges his father to “Help him,” but the boy lacks the strength (physical and existential) to do so himself. He withdraws at his father’s command to stop holding the old man’s hand as they walk, not daring to defy him, but later, when they leave Ely to find his own way, the boy admonishes his father: “You always say watch out for bad guys. He wasn’t a bad guy. You can’t even tell anymore!”

Much farther down the road, the boy again cries, “Help him, Papa,” this time, on behalf of a thief who has stolen their belongings. The film grants the boy a more central role in this encounter than the novel does, as he sleeps while the thief gathers up all their belongings around him, rather than while the father and son are both away. It is a complex act, with the capacity for causing their death, and yet, in carrying it out, the thief spares the boy. In the father’s later confrontation with the thief, he leaves the man pleading and shivering, naked on the side of the road. As the camera pans out to follow the father and son walking on, screenwriter Penhall adds a snippet of dialogue to emphasize the father’s growing loss of compassion, and the son’s increasing autonomy, as the torch of humanity is passed: “You’ll learn,” the father admonishes in the distance, and defiantly, the son responds: “I don’t wanna learn!” Turning on his son in anger for the first time in the film, the father curses. He shouts that the boy is going to have to learn to take care of himself, the struggle for survival winning out over the struggle to be human. But the boy responds, “He’s just hungry. He’s gonna die. He’s gonna die anyway. He’s just scared I’m scared You’re not the one who has to worry about everything.”

This time, the boy’s unwavering compassion yields action, and they return to leave clothes and food for the thief. Hillcoat’s vision of the pair’s journey makes it apparent that carrying the fire of humanity down the road is a job that has already fallen to the son.

“Yes I am! I *am* the one!”

The film’s camerawork lends a sense of intimacy and isolation to these portrayals of father and son—the closeness of their bond is communicated visually through close-up two-shots that dominate the screen, while their isolation in the scorched landscape is emphasized by wide, distant camera shots that convey a sense of smallness, as the two are dwarfed by the vast ashen deadness that surrounds them. Brightness and contrast, employed sparingly, serve as signifiers of life and death. Cheerful rainbow-colored labels on fruit cocktail, Spam, and Cheetos lining shelves in a fallout shelter; red graphics on what might be the last can of diet Coke on Earth still visible through the dust that covers them; pools and smears of crimson blood on the ground, oozing from the injured and newly dead, and carelessly spilled in a cannibal stronghold function as artifacts of sensation and a time when pain, joy, contentment, and agency themselves mattered.

Those times are also reflected in the father’s memories—sunlit flashbacks to a time when love was easy and free of cares—which occasionally punctuate the dull, lifelessness of the distressed landscape in the form of dream (or daydream) sequences. Fewer in number and less pastoral in nature than those found in the novel, these dreams

and memories serve to accentuate the film's commentary on the loss of humanity, and the beauty, innocence, love, and contentment that both arise from it and give it meaning.

The film's soundtrack traces these narrative shifts between humanity and brutality, moving easily between lyrical warmth and dissonant dread. The original score was written by Australian musician Nick Cave and his long-time collaborator, Warren Ellis. The pair composed the award-winning soundtrack to Hillcoat's darkly disturbing film *The Proposition* (2005), as well as for *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007). Cave, perhaps best known for his 1980s alternative rock band Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, has been a controversial figure throughout his musical career, making music that is, at once, innovative and anarchic. A member of the Australian Recording Industry Hall of Fame, Cave has garnered acclaim for the intensity and ingenuity of his work, which at the same time has been critiqued for its dark, violent sound, and intertwined, dominant themes of death, love, and religion. It is thus perfectly suited for Hillcoat's post-apocalyptic vision. Cave and Ellis's score adds a disquieting edge to *The Road* that delivers an element of terror found in the book but otherwise generally missing in the film.

The absence of that tangible narrative "edge" of terror in Hillcoat's adaptation may draw some degree of criticism from McCarthy fans and scholars. McCarthy's power lies in his talent as a wordsmith—a talent not easily adapted to the visual medium—leading to critical speculation as to whether a "faithful" adaptation of the author's work can ever truly be accomplished. On other critical fronts, however, this adaptation of the multiple award-winning novel has met with acclaim in its own right (*Rolling Stone*, *Variety*, *Box Office*).^{iv} While nominated for awards from a number of film critics' societies, BAFTA, and Critics Choice, and a winner of awards for Best Actor (Utah Film Critics Association) and Best Cinematography (San Diego Film Critics Society), the film was largely overlooked in the Academy Awards. With its widest release in only 396 theaters, the film's box office gross is a low \$14,563,027.00, less than one-tenth that of *No Country for Old Men*.^v

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Notes

ⁱ See Walsh 2008; Edwards 2008.

ⁱⁱ McCarthy 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Director's notes www.theroad-movie.com. Accessed 1/15/10.

^{iv} See Hammond 2009; McCarthy 2009; Travers 2009.

^v "The Road" *Box Office Mojo*. <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=road08.htm>. Accessed 2/13/10.