

## Cormac McCarthy Looks at Modern America

As readers of my the preceding review know, I admired the film version of Cormac McCarthy's novel, *No Country for Old Men* and saw the movie once or twice before I read the novel. My first reading--I have reread it a number of times--was done somewhat in haste; I went over it chiefly because I relished the movie and wanted to investigate its source. It took me time to adjust to the novel, which makes unusual demands on the reader's attentiveness. The storytelling is far from chronological and discrete bits of information are added to the story that modify a reader's understanding of what happened a hundred pages earlier; small clues to the motives of the characters are dropped into the narrative at remote points and only the most careful reading allows for an understanding of the tale, to the extent that one is available.

Subject matter? That in itself is a bit of a mystery. With its criminality and violence, powerfully (and not simply gruesomely) rendered, one might say that it is about the drugs wars in the border lands of Southwest Texas, but the appearance of Anton Chigurh as the Anti-Christ suggests an apocalyptic condition more broadly characteristic of the country. In other hands, the story, with its shootings, explosions and corpses, might be a vehicle for a popular crime or mystery writer, but McCarthy is far better than that.

The bare outline of the novel, which many readers know already, is that Llewellyn Moss, a welder and mechanic, happens upon an aborted drug deal in the Texas desert outside of Sanderson, where he lives in a trailer park with his wife. Out hunting antelope in the desert on a late-winter morning, Moss discovers several dead men, apparently Mexican, a large stash of heroin and a document case with over two million in cash. For the rest of the novel, U.S.

government agents, Mexican drug lords, and assorted contract killers will be tracking him down; they will finally destroy him, but many others are also killed by the end of the story.

Why does Moss even take the money? The answer is not self-evident. Most readers will conclude that he stole the money simply because he wanted it, to escape the boredom and poverty of existence as a welder and mechanic in a small Texas town, to open up life for his wife and himself. That is doubtless true but it is also incomplete. The action that really sets the story in motion is not Moss's theft of the money but his decision-- taken several hours later-- to return to the crime scene in the desert in the middle of the night to offer succor to a Mexican survivor. The Mexican survivor has since been killed, and Moss encounters other unidentified men tracking the money and the heroin, party to one side or another of the aborted deal. He escapes, barely, but carries with him a gunshot wound and, because he has left his truck in the desert, which can easily be traced, feels compelled to flee Sanderson with his wife. This flight is ultimately unsuccessful, and Moss has to improvise continually as he uncovers more information about his pursuers, directing his wife from one location to another while he spends time between border-town Eagle Pass and a hospital on the Mexican side of the border in Piedras Negras.

Llewellyn Moss is something of a thrill-seeker with a conscience. A Viet Nam veteran, he (like the author) knows a good deal about guns, hunting, tracking people in the country, dressing wounds, avoiding detection, fleeing armed opponents in open territory. Later in the novel, we learn that he served not one but two tours of duty in Asia, the second presumably voluntarily, since conscripts were required to serve a single thirteen-month tour. After Moss has been killed, we learn that he was not simply a foot soldier but a trained sniper. Volunteer work also, very dangerous, that involved stalking and killing enemy soldiers, sometimes alone and deep in hostile territory. But his skills--by 1980, the date of the tale, when Moss is thirty-six--are

beginning to rust. On the outing with which the story begins, he fails to strike the antelope he has been tracking, an early hint that he won't escape the men pursuing *him*.

Moss knows very well that even taking the money--much less returning to the scene to help a man who is probably beyond aid anyway--is exceedingly dangerous. Later in the novel, when he has given a ride to an unnamed teenage girl hitchhiking on the interstate--a fifteen-year-old runaway who wants a new life in California, another thrill-seeker of sorts--he comments, "Things happen to you they happen. They don't ask first. They don't require your permission." A curiously passive construction, as though he had been compelled to steal the money and later return to the desert. Much of the conversation between the unnamed girl and Moss is on the order of light banter, the kind exchanged between strangers with no education, but when she asks "Are you sorry you become a outlaw?" and he answers, "Sorry I didn't start sooner," a reader suspects that he means it. "Most people will run from their own mother to hug death by the neck," he says. "They cant wait to see him." Still, Moss does have moral feeling, and at a restaurant off the interstate he gives the teenage girl a thousand dollars in cash so she can avoid hitchhiking and safely take a bus to California. It does her little good; some pages later, both are shot to death at a motel in or near Van Horn, apparently by Mexican gunmen who belong to "Acosta's men," the cartel that is pursuing Moss. The novel is filled with episodes like this--the ugly deaths of unknown people who count for little in this crowded, over-populated world. Early in the story, Anton Chigurh kills a man named Wyrick in order to steal his car. He had already killed a deputy sheriff and had taken his squad car; he pulled the second man over on the highway when he decided to exchange the police car he had taken for the one the other man was driving. When the police discover Wyrick's body, nothing is left to identify him save a receipt from a gas station in his breast pocket. The fifteen-year-old on the road with Moss is killed at

one of the numerous and nondescript roadside motels that are waystations for many in the novel; another sheriff describes her to Bell as "kind of a skankylookin old girl." An elderly woman who had been sitting in a rocking chair reading a newspaper in her second-floor apartment dies after being struck by stray gunfire from a shootout in Eagle Pass involving Chigurh, Moss and some killers from Acosta's group. These deaths register in the novel like deerflies that die off at the end of the summer.

Sheriff Bell, as those who have read the book or seen the movie know, is looking for Moss as well. But his intent is to protect him, to uncover information about the desert killings and other deaths that have occurred in the week the novel chronicles. Bell is certainly no thrill-seeker. The sheriff is a burnt-out case, stunned and frightened by the violence that has overtaken Texas and eager to retire from it all. Two-thirds of the way through the novel, he remarks that "This county has not had a unsolved homicide in forty-one years. Now it has nine of 'em in one week." Both Bell and Moss are veterans of war--Bell was a staff sergeant in World War II--and both are products of the working class of Southwest Texas. Both married teenage women; Moss's wife was only seventeen and Bell's eighteen when they got married. Both men have limited education but are intelligent and devoted to their wives. Both are childless, but for different reasons--the sheriff lost an infant daughter after the first year of a thirty-one-year marriage, while Moss and his wife have never had children. There is a hint in this that younger people have little confidence in the future. If Moss is a thrill-seeker with a conscience, Bell is the moral voice of the story, perhaps a stand-in for the author too, though the story is told so neutrally that is hard to judge. Bell became sheriff of Terrell Country in order to expiate what he took to be an act of dereliction during the war, when he "abandoned" a squad under his command, though it seems clear that his self-judgment is overly severe. He enjoys exercising

authority and concedes to the reader that "there was always some part of me that enjoys being in charge." But protecting people--what he calls "the urge to pull everyone back into the boat"--seems to be the more powerful motive.

There is virtually no moral comment on anything that happens in the book, other than the observations, at times of an apocalyptic nature, originating with Sheriff Bell. McCarthy allows Bell to speak to the reader in italicized passages, sometimes pages in length, in which he ruminates on his life, his marriage, and the changes he has seen. In a series of thoughts, fairly representative, that opens chapter seven, Bell notes a story he "read in the papers" about a survey of school teachers that circulated in the 1930s; the most serious complaints were about students who copied the work of others and talked in class. An updated version of the survey, from the late 1970s, includes rape, arson, drugs, murder, and suicide. McCarthy has specifically set the story in 1980, that year exactly, which is 25 years before the novel was published. He seems to be asking the reader to look back at the slow but unstoppable moral erosion that has gathered speed in the country in the last generation, and to which our present economic troubles bear further testimony. The emergence of gangs and wars over the sale and distribution of drugs is not strictly contemporary and can be traced to an earlier period, but the kind of violence McCarthy describes and the reports of gangsterism in Mexico seem more of the immediate moment.

A central mystery of the novel is the identity of one of its few survivors. Reminiscent of Shakespearean tragedies this novel is, where by the end of the tale nearly all of the principal and even minor characters are dead except Sheriff Bell and the ultra-mysterious Anton Chigurh. The difference, of course, is that in Shakespeare evil characters are either destroyed or, like Iago, taken under control; Chigurh and other malefactors survive. McCarthy has given the character

an odd name with a Slavic ring. His nationality is never identified; all we know is that he is at home with both English and Spanish, like many in Texas, and has chosen to volunteer his services to acquire the missing funds for another unidentified "businessman" who may not even have known that the funds were missing. Chigurh intends to kill everyone who gets in his way and some who do not, as I noted in the movie review, and relishes bizarre games of chance in which a coin toss determines a character's fate.

The novel opens with a killing of a young deputy sheriff named Haskins, after Chigurh somehow manages to slip his handcuffs inside a police station. We discover much later that Chigurh had killed a man in a parking lot who had taunted him at a restaurant. In effect, it seems that he allowed himself to be arrested by the police simply to test his powers to escape the shackles and kill the man who arrested him. By the end of the novel, he has killed about a dozen people and emerges as a new human type. In my review of the film version of the novel, I reported that the Coen brothers omitted a late scene in *No Country*, when Chigurh seeks out a businessman with some unspecified involvement in the drug trade to whom the money that Moss had stolen "belongs." "I've been at some pains to recover your property so I'd prefer not to be addressed as some sort of bearer of bad news here," he says, conceding that some of the money has been lost, about \$100,000. "Part of that was stolen and part of it went to cover my expenses." The tone is very business-like until Chigurh takes a didactic turn. He has an odd taste for lecturing other characters in the story, some of whom he is on the verge of shooting. His superior position allows him the option; otherwise he is silent. "What you need to consider," he says to the businessman to whom he is returning the money, "is how you lost the money in the first place. Who you listened to and what happened when you did." He sounds like a therapist advising a patient who is about to make another bad marriage. But his goals are not therapeutic,

and as I note in the preceding essay, he emerges as the anti-Christ from the Yeats poem. The novel, in fact, is a modern rendering of the Apocalypse. Invisible powers control much of the world, and their actions (or their effects) become visible in clear daylight when the dead are discovered in hotels, deserts and streets. (Question: Does McCarthy have a weakness for conspiracy thinking?) Chigurh is a kind of modern technician of hunting and killing. "You think I'm like you, that it's just greed," he says to Carson Wells, another Viet Nam veteran and professional killer who has been tracking Moss and is about to become another Chigurh victim. "But I'm not like you. I live a simple life." And strangely enough, the reader believes him. Chigurh simply follows a vocation--hunting and killing people. The unnamed businessman for whom he has "worked" and he himself are the survivors of the story; their adversaries have been killed or (like Bell) go into retirement. Amoral killers and their non-morality are the direction the world has taken.

It isn't possible to read *No Country* without thinking of Hemingway. McCarthy has deployed an extremely spare style, perhaps even simpler than Hemingway's. Moss's wife, Carla Jean, is interviewed by Bell half-way through the novel; both are concerned about the welfare of her husband, and whether the police can find him before his adversaries do. She says to Bell, "Nineteen"--her age--"is old enough to know that if you've got something that means the world to you it's all that more likely that it will get took away." That is a Hemingway sentiment, and some themes of the story, including hunting, nature, and violence, belong to Hemingway as well. That quintessential Hemingway story, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," ends with a famous parody of the Lord's Prayer, which John Berryman in a brief essay calls the author's "malignant dissatisfaction with the Christian universe." The most significant act of charity in *No Country* comes in the shoot-out in Eagle Pass. In the movie, the Coen brothers stage a gunfight between

Moss and Chigurh, and in the novel that eventually does take place. But before that happens, Moss confronts and disarms Chigurh in a hotel room, foregoing the chance to kill him. He runs from the building instead, hoping to avoid the bloodshed he had been predicting for himself ever since he fled Sanderson. But the moral deed only allows Chigurh to survive and follow his death-dealing path.

But there are class issues in McCarthy's story that don't seem as conspicuous in Hemingway. Few of the characters in the book speak good English; they instead use the expressive vernacular of simple words and doubtful grammar that McCarthy deploys so effectively. Moss and his wife and Sheriff Bell certainly are not articulate, and the Mexicans are assigned virtually no speech at all. The ones who speak the best are the most dangerous characters in the novel, even though two of them--Carson Wells and the unnamed businessman in Houston who hires him to kill Chigurh--are themselves killed. The simplicity of the style has a correlative in the bareness of the world described. The reader has no particular impression of the appearance of any of the characters, and I inevitably thought of the movie, not very meaningful in this context, when I imagined what they looked like. Towns, cities, buildings, and rooms are described in the briefest possible terms, and the general setting is of poor towns populated by anonymous people of limited means. To obtain some further insight into the question-- Hemingway and McCarthy--I turned to *Men Without Art*, a book by Wyndham Lewis, one of the best books of criticism to come out of the 1930s. Lewis remarks that Frederick Henry of *A Farewell to Arms* "has come over to Europe [during the Great War] for the fun of the thing, as an alternative to baseball, to take part in the Sport of Kings. It has not occurred to him that it is no longer the sport of kings." Lewis goes on to describe Henry's "really heroic imperviousness to thought." The American "Doughboy" and the "English Tommy," in Lewis's words, "join



hands" in their ignorance of what is happening to Europe and to them. "They are an integral part of that world *to whom things happen* [emphasis in the original]: they are not those who cause or connive at the happenings." Lewis goes on to describe "this capacity for being *the person that things are done to*, rather than the person who naturally initiates what is done to others." Lewis, writing with the memory of the Great War, calls these people the "cannon-fodder," "the cattle outside the slaughtering house." He goes on to call the simple speech of Hemingway's characters, bereft of any ornamentation, as "the patois of the "poor white," the negro, of the uneducated immigrant." It is the speech that was becoming universal in the English-speaking world, and Lewis regretted this.

Lewis goes on to cite a passage of dialogue that occurs early in the novel, when Henry's wound is being cleaned and dressed by a nurse. He writes:

I read this scene as I came to it, just as I should watch scenes unfolding in the cinema, without pictorial criticism. . .It is like reading a newspaper, day by day, about some matter of absorbing interest--say the reports of a divorce, murder or libel action. If you say, *anyone* could write it, you are mistaken, because, to obtain that smooth effect, of commonplace reality, there must be no sentimental or other heightening, the number of words expended must be proportionate to the importance and length to the respective phases of the action. . .It is an art then, from this standpoint, like the cinema, or like those "modernist" still-life pictures, in which, in place of *painting* a match box upon a canvas, a piece of actual match box is stuck on. . .Hemingway's is a poster-art, in this sense, or a *cinema in words*.

Think of this when you're reading McCarthy.

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