

## No Country for Old Men

CORMAC MCCARTHY

Knopf, \$24.95 cloth, ISBN 0-375-40677-8

William Faulkner once said with some bitterness that he was “working tooth and nail at [his] lifetime ambition to be the last private individual on earth and expect[ed] every success since apparently there [was] no competition for the place.” Cormac McCarthy has taken Faulkner’s place in his effort to become a successful recluse and also, I think, as the country’s greatest living writer. Of course, Faulkner gave up any claim to either distinction by dying in 1962, but the Texas transplant may yet equal or surpass Faulkner in those and other categories as well.

When he finished his magnificent Border Trilogy in 1997 with *Cities of the Plain*, neither McCarthy the recluse nor McCarthy the master of American gothic narratives left the Texas-Mexico border behind. *No Country for Old Men* is set entirely in south Texas with forays into the neighboring Mexican state of Coahuila. But *No Country* relies perhaps less on place and more on time—the time being 1980 when drug trafficking reached new heights (or perhaps more aptly, new depths). The “old men” of the title, specifically one old man, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, is not out of place because of his age (as was the speaker in Yeats’ poem “Sailing to Byzantium” from which the title was taken) but because of his innocence, his adherence to an ethic that was suddenly rendered out of date by the near-total immorality nurtured by smuggling drugs for huge profits.

The novel begins with a short monologue on evil by Sheriff Bell, a man of retirement age who has served the constituents of his county as unblinkingly as he had his country in World War II. He had, in his time, encountered evil and found the experience unsettling. For example, he talked to an unrepentant killer whom he had captured just before the man was executed. “What do you say to a man that by his own admission has no soul?” he asked. “I really believe that he knew he was goin to be in hell in fifteen minutes.” But murdering a single person without a motive was small potatoes compared with the total moral anarchy loosed by the drug business. As the sheriff himself put it, that murderer “wasn’t nothin compared to what was coming down the pike.”

“Sailing to Byzantium” contains a vividly startling image on age, one that is used to great effect in the novel.

*An aged man is but a  
paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a  
stick ...*

But the next word is *unless*. Unless a person leaves something fine and durable behind him, something such as a golden bird set upon a bough to sing forever of the truth, then mortality and transience will have prevailed. What does an aging Texas sheriff leave as a legacy? His fidelity to his people, especially to his wife, and his own code of honor—these are all he can offer. The trick, as Sheriff Bell acknowledges, is to oppose and

overcome total evil without becoming evil oneself. And that quite simply is the theme of the novel. But it’s the presentation of good versus evil, the couching of this familiar conflict in a truly stunning tale, that makes *No Country for Old Men* rise to the level of excellence. This novel then is McCarthy’s bird of “hammered gold” singing to us “of what is past, or passing, or to come.” In that context, it is a rather dire cautionary tale.

By 1980 Sheriff Bell and his ethic are anachronisms in what has become a state of increasingly violent anarchy driven in part by drug money but also by unmitigated lawlessness and at times by personal evil. The purveyor of much of this evil is a man called Chigurh. Anton Chigurh has been hired by drug lords to retrieve missing money. Imagine this: If the violence and bloodiness of the films of Quentin Tarantino or the movie *Goodfellas* were doubled and trebled many times over, they might begin to approach the anarchy of Chigurh’s world. This, McCarthy seems to be warning, is what is “to come” if the fight for ethics is abandoned.

Caught between these two antithetical states, “in passing,” is one Llewellyn Moss, an extraordinary ordinary man. A Vietnam vet, he resembles the protagonists of McCarthy’s border novels and is a consummate outdoorsman who can shoot, track, improvise, and survive with the best of them. But it is the worst of them he finds himself confronting in this book.

So confident is Moss of his ability to confront whatever difficulties life throws at him that he goes antelope hunting in the Texas desert without carrying any water. Moss misses the antelope but comes upon a scene of a drug deal gone bad. He finds several corpses and one near-corpse, a dying man who begs for water Moss doesn’t have. He also finds an SUV nearly full of heroin bricks wrapped in plastic. Moss knows that such a huge amount of contraband will bring others to the scene and that he should merely walk away. Instead, he scouts the area, finds bloody footprints, and tracks them to still another dead body, this one with a satchel containing “several million dollars.” Again he pauses, knowing that taking the money will totally change his rather idyllic life and create unforeseeable danger. Of course, he does it anyway. Returning home, he sits alone quietly in his truck and reflects, “You live to be a hundred, he said and there wont be another day like this one. As soon as he said it he was sorry.” The die was cast. The dying had barely begun.

The events recounted thus far occur in the first 20 pages of this spellbinding Texas morality play. Most of the 280 or so remaining pages are a playing out of the dramatic conflicts and characterizations laid out in these opening scenes. And a wild ride it is, but always under the reins of a master craftsman for whom accurate details and the exact word are almost a religion.

Along the way, other characters with vested interests in the struggle are introduced. Moss’ wife Carla Jean (her name will remind most Texans and many others of Carla Faye Tucker, who in 1998 became the first woman executed in Texas since 1863) is sucked into the vortex of violence simply because she

is who she is, a 19-year-old fatalist completely in love with her husband. She is

*old enough to know that if you have got something that means the world to you it's all that more likely it'll get took away.*

Sheriff Bell's love for his own wife Loretta is his major source of strength and about the only good reason he has for carrying on, as he tells us at least a half dozen times. At one point, in a reflective mood, the sheriff is standing on a bridge looking off into the distance. A trucker slowly driving by

*leaned from the window as he passed. Dont jump, Sheriff. She aint worth it. ... Bell smiled. Truth of the matter is, he said, she is.*

Meanwhile, events spin more and more out of control. Someone else has stolen the heroin and is being hunted by smugglers. There is a shoot-out in the bordertown of Eagle Pass, and blood flows freely. As Chigurh's employers in Houston lose control of him, they hire an ex-Special Forces colonel, Carson Wells, to rein him in. Bloodletting begets bloodletting until the killings are spread out over nearly two-thirds of the Texas-Mexico border, from Eagle Pass to El Paso. Once matters are begun, many of the outcomes are inevitable. Even when we know what is going to transpire, perhaps especially when we know what's going to happen, our concern deepens. To follow every thread to its conclusion here would diminish the effect for many readers. Suffice it to say that this is a highly moral tale, even somewhat didactic. Although its apocalyptic lesson is a horrific one, *No Country for Old Men* does offer hope. Loyalty and love can provide meaning where otherwise there would be none.

It is fitting that an Irish American writer with a name as Hibernian as Cormac McCarthy should take his title, and perhaps his artistic theory, from Ireland's greatest poet, W.B. Yeats. Old-school lawmen like Sheriff Bell and genuinely independent people of the earth such as Llewellyn Moss are becoming as rare as great poets. Although there are good writers out there, no one can match McCarthy. It is, I think, safe to say that when he passes, he'll not be replaced.

Yeats wrote another poem that is as well-known as "Sailing to Byzantium" but with a darker vision. Within the 22 lines of "The Second Coming" are several that are as suggestive of a looming Armageddon as is this new McCarthy novel:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.*

Both Yeats and McCarthy let their work speak for them. Grecian goldsmiths didn't give interviews. Neither did the master Italian violin makers of the 17th and 18th centuries. Faulkner resented those curious ones who sought him out in Oxford, Mississippi. At 72 years of age, Cormac McCarthy is still a purist who mostly keeps to himself. I am pleased that he eschews publicity. We are lucky to have such an untainted giant among us. ■

REVIEWER: **Jim Grinnell** is a writer and reviewer in DeKalb, IL.