

Reflections on a title

I am in a movie theater. The main character is about my age, and the times have passed him by. He is a sheriff, like his daddy before him, and he can handle the problems that his daddy used to handle, but the ultra-violence being unleashed by the modern drug wars is too much for him. The title of the movie perfectly captures his situation: *No Country for Old Men*. As I watch the movie, I realize that I used to be able to handle the violence depicted in the movies that they made when my father was still alive, but the graphic ultra-violence being shown by the modern movie director is too much for me. This is no theater for old men.

I am watching this movie because I have friends who enjoyed it, and I like them so much that we are still friends in spite of this. Before seeing it, I bristled through Cormac McCarthy's novel. Annie Proulx loved it, of course, because McCarthy is one of the Tough Guys she is trying so hard to emulate. "The dialogue is perfect. No one has McCarthy's ear for regional talk, nor eye for details of place." In fact no one anywhere – not even in West Texas, which I admit may as well be the moon – ever spoke English like this. The dialogue is colorful book-talk – artificial, mannered, contrived. As such, it isn't bad. But don't tell me it isn't such. "It's a mess, ain't it Sheriff?" "If it ain't it'll do till a mess gets here." That's good fun. But people talk that well only on the printed page, when their author is afraid that if they don't, the critics

might not use the word "mythic" in their reviews.

Joyce Carol Oates does better than Proulx: "reads like a prose film by Quentin Tarantino." This alerts us to the reader to whom the novel is pitched: the case of arrested male development, *genera* macho, *species* gun fetish. In the mouth of Oates, such a remark may be praise. If she is taking a shot at McCarthy, it is another case of the pot and the kettle.

The most obvious explanation for McCarthy's little exercise in the pornography of violence is that he had his eye securely focused on the movie rights from first sentence to last, and figured to out-monster *The Silence of the Lambs* with his psychopathic hit-man Anton Chigurh. Now the hard-working cops who have to visit grisly crime scenes know that most serial killers are pathetic, nauseating losers – they aren't canny, gifted, brilliant, brave, invulnerable, and five steps ahead of everyone else; they are sick and unimaginative, but precisely because they are such dreary unremarkable losers when they aren't murdering the weak and trusting, they are hard to identify and catch. In a country of 330 million people mostly packed into heavily urban and suburban areas where nobody knows his neighbor, their random and senseless crimes will naturally challenge even the most competent law enforcement agents. Chigurh is a fantasy villain, not a possible human being. Again, that could be okay – the whole novel, if you don't want to call it self-parody, caricature, or trash, is pure fantasy. An artist can use myth, parable, surrealism, or science fiction to create a compelling fictional landscape – unless he has sold out to the diseased appetite of the most debased sector of his readership as spectacularly as McCarthy has.

Chigurh is the character who hooks the reader, and later the viewers of the Coen

Brothers movie. The engine that drives the narrative is very simple: when Chigurh is present, we are wetting our pants – with fearful trembling, or gleeful anticipation, depending on our predilections – until he dispatches another innocent or, in his inscrutable way, spares someone. His continual appearances are "motivated" – not by McCarthy's infatuation with violence, oh no – but by the narrative structure, which is a book-length chase scene. But McCarthy is a Major Writer, a darling of the critics, so Chigurh cannot be, lit-critically, the protagonist. That would be Ed Tom Bell, the small-town sheriff who tries with magnificent ineptitude to protect Chigurh's primary target, Llewelyn Moss, and whose tiresome monologues (on abortion and euthanasia and his daddy and the escalating drug violence) run the action to ground every 20 pages. Most of the paying public, and even a few reviewers, find this lawman to be tedious as hell. James Russell Lowell said indignantly of Thoreau's first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, that he had been invited to a boating party, not to be preached at. Readers of *No Country for Old Men* have been invited to a splatter party, not to be philosophized at – especially not to be cracker-barrel-philosophized at. But McCarthy, with one eye on the New York critics who have puffed him up to college curriculum status, is striving for Quality with the monologues. For the hoi polloi, the climax is naturally the last shootout; but for the intelligentsia, McCarthy has provided something more in their line – a Big Revelation at the end, after all the bodies are interred, that Bell's book-length ineffectuality *may* just be explained by his haunted memory of a failure of his Texas masculinity during World War II. It is downright painful to see McCarthy going for the gravitas here. The sheriff's testimony is incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial.

If McCarthy intends the sheriff's digressions on abortion and euthanasia to be taken seriously as moral argumentation, then I can only say that the author is a right-wing Catholic scold purveying arguments so inane it would demean us to take them seriously. If McCarthy is going to deflect this criticism by the craven expedient of claiming that the sheriff's opinions are not the author's but merely intended to further flesh out the moralistic world-view of a garrulous ruminator who elsewhere tut-tuts about narcotics and violence, then my answer is that these digressions are gratuitous: we already know that the sheriff is a windbag with a small-town mind, and we are worn out with his moralizing. But it is very difficult to believe that McCarthy has any aesthetic distance from his sheriff: this isn't a novel where the author has himself under control, unless it counts for his self-discipline that he never loses track of the bodies and that he stays the course until everyone we care about is dead.

One of the gassiest elements in the book is the sheriff's oft-repeated – everything in this novel is oft-repeated – love and gratitude for the good woman that is his wife. Meeting Moss's 19-year-old spouse, the sheriff immediately intuits that this here is another good woman. He surely hopes that Moss understands the treasure that is his. This trope seems to be recurrent among a certain breed of manly writers: the best thing that ever happened to them was the piece of totally unearned good luck when they came across that lovely little package that is the best thing that ever happened to them. The appearance of this dreary motif is, I suppose, not without psychological interest. If McCarthy could write as beautifully and as truthfully about these women as he writes about guns and horses, we might almost believe he believes it.

But Ed Tom's chowderhead bouts of nostalgia and hand-wringing – he says the drug wars have altered human nature and the devil now rides a .357 magnum fiddlestick – are not the only locus of philosophy in this novel. It turns out that Chigurh, too, likes to talk – especially to selected victims who are going to live only as long as his Socratic dialogues with them last. (This is at least an inventive way of bringing the tension of the pants-wetters to an excruciating pitch.) Chigurh, you see, is a kind of force, or fate, or fury, or Nemesis – look, he's *something* Classical, out of the Greeks or ancient somebodies, all right? – and he has his own unique brand of stern integrity: he makes sure that words are taken literally and seriously, that accounts are strictly kept, that agreements are enforced to the letter of the letter. He isn't *only* about the killing, oh no – like Clytemnestra slaughtering Agamemnon for purely personal reasons but unconsciously executing the will of the gods on him, Chigurh is an agent of karma, of act balancing act until the accounts are all settled.

Sure he is.

Chigurh's Heideggerian blather about determinism and chance, delivered to the squealing mice under his huge paw before he executes them as a sauce to the reader's sadomasochism, is still not the most repellent of McCarthy's stratagems. What touches bottom – and here I 'fess up to what I despise most in any writer – is McCarthy's attempt to have it both ways. The characters who have to listen to Chigurh's disquisitions on determinism and chance before being shot to death always say, "You're crazy." If I scoff at Chigurh's speeches, McCarthy can join with these characters and answer me: "Well, sure, Chigurh is a psychopath." But I know that McCarthy thinks he knows that these musings are also deep and cool and scary. I

don't like the way McCarthy has built in plausible deniability as to whether he believes what Chigurh believes. He is playing a little authorial shell game, implying that Chigurh is a demiurge or one of the Norns, while fending off the hard questions about Chigurh's philosophical bloviating. Here he touches bottom as a novelist. It is bad enough that he panders to the gun nuts with loving descriptions of lethal weaponry. (I use the adjective "loving" without sarcasm or irony, because McCarthy is truly enraptured by guns and by the precise nature of the damage that each caliber of ammunition can do to human beings and animals, and he writes with lyrical exactitude about the technical details.) It is still worse to dress up the pandering in highly stylized prose in order to gull the stupider critics into thinking that he is the second coming of Hemingway and Faulkner instead of the second coming of Mickey Spillane. But worst of all is to dress up this X-rated video game as a *philosophical* novel of character and ideas – and then, when someone undresses it, to claim that after all it is just another episode of cops and robbers.

Then there is the faux-Hemingway/Faulkner style, although I guess McCarthy should get a few cynical points for yoking these two antipodes, the spareness of the one with the Grand Guignol of the other, and putting the combination entirely at the service of pornography. It may be that a reader does want to keep turning the pages just to see how it bleeds out – when I was a tadpole, I had that experience with *Marathon Man*, a piece of manipulative trash that I nonetheless compulsively read through to the end. Part of getting older is that you put down stuff that you would have kept reading in the old days – maybe because, with death creeping closer, you just don't have time to waste any more; but whatever the explanation, now you don't care if

they catch the mad Nazi genius or not. But whether you want to stay for a final reckoning and an accurate body count, or you bail half way through, you will find *No Country for Old Men* to be repetitive and dull.

And mannered. There is very little in the realm of stylistic affectation more contemptible than heterodox punctuation employed solely in the interest of artiness. Throughout this novel, dialogue is rendered without quotation marks. This is already pretentious, irritating, and without any possible justification, but the fault is compounded by the author's refusal for long stretches of extended conversations to identify who is talking, inevitably leading to uncertainty in the reader. Apostrophes seem to be used for possessives but abandoned for most, but not all, contractions. Why? To send out advance notification of Serious Authorship; to signify High Art.

It has been rumored that McCarthy's manuscript came to the publisher at twice the length that we have. One reviewer speculates that perhaps a magnificent novel was lost to the exigencies of the marketplace. It is pretty cheeky to blame the *marketplace* for a novel that panders to it to the last possible degree of pandering. I will speculate that, if the rumor is true, it is not possible that McCarthy's prose has suffered from the pruning. It does not matter what the missing pages contain, because what we have is already overlong – this is a short work that can be read quickly and still sorely try the patience of the reader. It is already swollen to bursting with violence and *faux* philosophy; and the mind cannot conceive of a third element that could, by doubling the size of the novel, shorten the perceived reading time. Introducing a whole 'nother aesthetic element would not succeed in diluting the luridness and sentimentality. In any case, after seeing what McCarthy did indubitably write and like

and send to the publisher, I'll take the judgment of any editor in the country over the author's own.

If there is a moral in the novel, it isn't wrapped up in any of Chigurh's meditations on human destiny or Ed Tom's old-maidish laments that this is no country for old men any more. (Can a popular author sucking up to gun-lovers sink any lower than cadging his title from a poem by W. B. Yeats?) The real moral is found about half-way through the unfolding carnage. Chigurh is a force of nature, a superman, completely implacable and unstoppable, except that Moss, our Everyman on the run, has in fact gotten the drop on him and has a shotgun aimed at his head. (Did McCarthy nod? Fallibility is *not* mythic.) Unaccountably to every reader, Moss spares Chigurh. This is one of a handful of gestures by which we are to understand that Moss has some goodness in him. But if you are that stupid, you would already be long dead, probably from trying to milk a bull. In the universe of this novel, the true but unacknowledged moral is plain: if you ever have a relentless psychopathic hit man at your mercy, the one who is going to hunt you down and kill you no matter how long it takes and even if you return all the money, plug him. It's not a moral with much carry-over into the lives of McCarthy's readers, a large proportion of whom are college professors. But it is easy to memorize. I don't know how McCarthy missed it.

None of these comments are necessarily applicable to the film, which for several reasons is superior to the book. For starters, the Coens are much better at movies than McCarthy is at novels; but additionally, they eliminated McCarthy's superfluous revelation, they cut the sheriff's monologues, and they had Tommy Lee Jones, who

would be worth watching if he played the part of a highway sign.

By my values, the film isn't that well edited. It gets a case of the slows whenever there are suppurating wounds to dwell on, which is often. But I know that some viewers are as mesmerized by close-ups of blood and pus as others are by the philosophical debates that Chigurh conducts with his victims before blowing them to kingdom come; so for those tastes, I imagine the movie moves right along and is eminently watchable, except when the sheriff reads a restaurant menu.

I have no substantive complaint to register with the movie other than expressing my disgust with the decision of the Coen Brothers to make it at all: with at least a million literary properties to choose from, they seized on this one. But such are the times, and they provide us with the definition of decadence. There have always been large numbers of hacks who serve up salable trash; and there have always been a few technically competent artists (Brian de Palma, Quentin Tarantino) whose natural milieu is the cesspit. Decadence occurs when all the lines have been blurred, and even the gifted Coens, and the critics who review them, are magnetized by violence and taken in by a bad writer's pretension to update the Greek tragedians. It probably does not even need to be said that this film won the Academy Award for Best Picture during the second term of George W. Bush.