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CORMAC MCCARTHY'S FEVERED PRAYER

The Road by Cormac McCarthy (Knopf, 2006)

A Book Review by Amy Hewes

When I first started *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, I was compelled to read passages aloud to whomever I could corral: my husband, my fifteen-year-old daughter, an acquaintance sitting two tables away in Uptown Café. The language is that beautiful—poetic, haunting:

The roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing. Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators. Their barrows heaped with shoddy. Towing wagons or carts. Their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all.¹

Such lyric passages take you—like a “migrant in a feverland”—through a blasted, post-apocalyptic world thinly peopled with nameless husks barely recognizable as human. The story follows a father and his young son as they travel from somewhere in the Southeast over the Cumberland Gap to the Gulf. Theirs is a journey of last resort: having endured nuclear winter for ten years or so, they must chance the dangers of “the road” to find food and a community and environment that can sustain life.

The Road is the darkest of nightmares, terrifyingly familiar and believable in our violent, nuclear, hair-triggered world.

So, why read it?

Because this powerful tale not only serves as a clarion call to change course, step off the road that leads to ultimate destruction, but also because *The Road* is an exquisitely-crafted story of hope and love. By stripping the world to its core, nearly devoid of civilization, McCarthy is able to delineate and starkly contrast the brute ugliness of mankind's animal nature with that which makes us not only most human, but also, perhaps, redeemable.

What first propels you through the book is McCarthy's language. The very beauty of his words transmits a message of hope—he is a man in love with the world, despite its horrors. Those familiar with McCarthy's other works, such as *Blood Meridian* or *All the Pretty Horses*, will not be surprised by the fact that he doesn't prettify the images. There are scenes that are acutely disturbing, even repellent. At the same time, the wasted landscape is portrayed in language akin to litany. Over and over, McCarthy worshipfully describes the "cauterized terrain," the "cold autistic dark," the "ashen scabland," and the "blackened shape of rock standing out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash rising up and blowing downcountry through the waste. The track of the dull sun moving unseen beyond the murk."

More than a witnessing, McCarthy's prose has the effect of a keening reverential prayer—and where there is prayer, there is faith in salvation, however tempered. In this desolate world, a "single gray flake" of snow serves as "the last host of christendom."

Bleak though McCarthy's christendom may be, he does provide a savior: the boy who carries the light of love as he travels through the landscape as a "warrant," a "pilgrim," a "mendicant friar," one of the scarce "good guys." Being one of the good guys is pretty basic: you don't kill anyone who won't kill you, and you don't eat anyone. Literally. But the boy goes beyond this stupifyingly basic good guy/bad guy pact. He wants to save everyone: a dog, another little boy, a foul-smelling old man who looks like "a pile of rags fallen off a cart."

Given the horrors he has witnessed and the conditions of survival, the boy's goodness—his *faith* in goodness—is unaccountable, but compelling. Moreover, because he was born after the nuclear cataclysm, he has no experience with the "sacred idiom": "Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true." Nonetheless, the boy intuitively grasps the lost environment, lost civilization, lost love-thy-neighbor ethic. He is the one who carries "the fire," a reference to Prometheus, who in Greek myth gave mankind the gift of fire, thereby initiating an era of human enlightenment.

While McCarthy gives us a savior in whom to invest our hope of rebirth, it is the powerful love between father and son that animates this dead world. I don't know, off-hand, if Cormac McCarthy has children, but his portrayal of the absolute tenderness and fierce

devotion that the father and son have for each other is extraordinarily vivid, believable and wrenching. Their relationship is the heart of the book, offsetting the terrible weight of waste and ruin, and finally convincing us that humanity might be worth saving. If we are capable of such love, we might have a chance.

Perhaps this *is* McCarthy's thesis: We might have a chance before the light of the world is "turned out and is gone," but we need to face the danger we live in, we need to imagine this unimaginable future. *The Road* is our wake-up call. "Look around you," says McCarthy. "Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember."

Like the boy and his father, humankind is sitting "in the dusk" at a "crossroads." The old maps are useless, the old names and forms of the world winking out. But perhaps, McCarthy suggests, we can still become "good guys." And then, just maybe, says the boy softly, "It's not so far. It's not too late." 

Notes

1. This quote and all others in this essay are taken from Cormac McCarthy's book. McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Knopf, 2006.