

No Country for Old Men by Cormac McCarthy (Picador) R89

Somewhere in Texas, on the Mexican border, a Vietnam veteran called Llewellyn Moss, out hunting antelope, stumbles across a scene of carnage: a drug deal gone wrong, leaving unclaimed a stash of heroin and a briefcase filled with money. He leaves behind the heroin but absconds with the money.

Thus begins Cormac McCarthy's latest novel, and it is every bit as bloody as this opening promises. Apart from Moss, it features Anton Chigurh, whose favourite though not exclusive means of execution is a stun-gun normally used for killing cattle. The novel derives most of its considerable drive from Chigurh's pursuit of Moss. It's an uneven contest: Chigurh has apparently inhuman means of tracing his victims, and no compunction in wiping them out. Moss, on the other hand, though hardly a pussycat (he was a sniper in Vietnam), hesitates to kill in cold blood or even self-defence. The ending is preordained.

The book has received rave reviews, mainly for the force and economy of its dialogue, the vigour of its plotting and the sheer scare value of its main villain.

The dialogue does indeed smoulder and crackle, and the characters converse with a kind of cowboy nonchalance as ominous as it is laconic. Seldom can such apparently inarticulate people have conveyed so much meaning in so few words. Here is one Wells, himself a hired killer, trying to persuade Moss not to take on Chigurh:

"You cant make a deal with him. Let me say it again. Even if you gave him the money he'd still kill you. There's no one alive on this planet that's had even a cross word with him. They're all dead. These are not good odds. He's a peculiar man. You could even say that he has principles."

Chigurh is a horrifying creation, and the novel is at its best in invoking, in its deadpan style, the emotionless homicidal mania of the man. As McCarthy demonstrated memorably in his earlier novel *Blood Meridian*, he is a dab hand at creating psychopathic killers, and Chigurh is no exception.

But McCarthy is not content with creating a masterpiece of unmotivated malignancy: he imbues his killer with a kind of morality or philosophy, as the self-styled agent of some impersonal train of events, a function of the fate of his victims:

"Every step you take is forever," he explains to a victim before shooting her, "You cant make it go away. . . .What else is there? Your life is made out of the days it's made out of. Nothin else. . . . For things at a common destination there is a common path. . . . I only have one way to live. . . . When I came into your life your life was over."

It is difficult, however, to take Chigurh's "principles" seriously as anything other than the delusions of a psychopath: the people who die at his hands do so because he chooses to kill them, not because of any impersonal destiny. Ultimately, McCarthy's attempt to dignify his killer with a philosophy seems merely portentous. Like the title, an utterly inappropriate quotation from WB Yeats, the novel over-reaches itself in trying to be something other than a very violent action thriller.

The story is given a further dimension, though, by the presence of another character and occasional narrator, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, the spokesman for old-time community values. He is the polar opposite of Chigurh, claiming "I never had to kill nobody and I am very glad of that fact." He sees, in the violence generated by the drug trade, a new kind of criminal and a new order of lawlessness: "I just have this feelin we're looking at something we really aint never seen before."

McCarthy presents his gallery of horrors as a lament for a mythical past, in which sheriffs saw their function as the protection of the people paying their salaries: "The

old time concern that the sheriffs had for their people is been watered down some,” Bell says. But readers of *Blood Meridian*, set in the “old” West, will know that when it suits McCarthy he can demythologise the distant past with as much vigour as he here indicts the recent past.

One doubts, in short, McCarthy’s good faith in dealing with past, present and future. Bell is a conservative who believes “the world is goin to hell in a handbasket”. Faced with a liberal woman who complains of “the way this country is headed” and claims she wants her granddaughter “to be able to have an abortion”, he says “... well mam I dont think you got any worries about the way the country is headed. The way I see it goin I dont have much doubt but what she’ll be able to have an abortion. I’m goin to say that not only will she be able to have an abortion, she’ll be able to have you put to sleep.”

But the novel is set in 1980, and we now know in which way the country was headed: not towards the conservative nightmare of abortion and euthanasia on demand, but the enthronement of George W Bush and his cronies who, in the name of the values celebrated by Bell, have been responsible for rather more deaths than Anton Chigurh and his associates.