

THE ROAD

by **Cormac McCarthy** (Picador) R290

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The title of Cormac McCarthy's latest novel clearly announces its lineal descent from the American road novel, such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and from road movies, such as *Easy Rider* and *Kings of the Road*. Always, in this genre, the road is the image of an ever-open potential, an ever-possible destination, of a kind of freedom that, according to the great road song, *Me and Bobbie McGee*, is "just another word for nothing left to lose".

In the words of yet another paean to the open road, Thorn Gunn's *On the Move*: "At worst, one is in motion; and at best, / Finding no absolute, in which to rest,/ One is always nearer by not keeping still.."

As is his wont, McCarthy appropriates the genre only to blow it sky- high. Ashe demolished the myth of the Wild West in *Blood Meridian*, he here turns the values of the road novel on their head. Freedom? Yes, the freedom of a blasted landscape, with nothing remaining save blackened ruins, devastated forests, ash-covered fields. Movement? Yes, the coerced movement of keeping going just to keep from falling prey to other survivors; creatures so crazed with hunger that they have taken to eating one another.

The novel is set at an unspecified time in the future. The world has been destroyed, apparently by a firestorm. A man and his little son are trudging along the road, with a vague notion that reaching the ocean might offer them some alternative to the ash and soot that seem to permeate the world.

The man cannot tell his son what it is they might find, but he has impressed upon the boy that the two of them are the "good guys" and that it is their function to "carry the fire" -- presumably the spark of a dead civilisation that could be kindled again somewhere, sometime. But to do so they have to escape the marauding bands of "bad guys", makeshift armies crossing the land in search of food, which is to say other human being: all animals and birds have become extinct and no plant life survives. The armies take with them women, not only for sexual purposes {they have male catamites for that) but also for procreation, which here means a ready food supply: The bad guys, in short, are truly bad.

It will be clear from details such as this that *The Road* is not for the squeamish. Readers of *Blood Meridian* and its almost equally gory successor, *No Country for Old Men*, will know what to expect. But. what is new and surprising in this novel is a pervasive and central tenderness, all the more luminous for being set in a blackened landscape where nothing grows or flowers. Here, against all odds, the love of two people for each other survives, tenaciously clinging to the:!! remnants of a morality based on compassion rather than survival.

The man and boy; we are told, at the outset, are "each the other's world entire". The boy in fact has no memory of a pre-apocalyptic world: his father is his only link with it, his mother having killed herself rather than face the devastated world into which she had brought an infant. ~Miraculously; the boy has inherited or acquired or been imbued with a selfless concern not only for his father but also for the other human beings they come across in their wanderings. In him, McCarthy embodies a fragile humanity that, illogically, even stupidly; subordinates self-interest to fellow-feeling. As for the man, "he knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God, God never spoke".

Not that McCarthy has gone soft. He remains the poet laureate of cosmic bleakness: "The days sloughed past uncounted and uncalendered; Along the interstate in the distance long lines of charred and rusting cars. The raw rims of the wheels sitting in a stiff gray sludge of melted rubber, in blackened rings of wire. The incinerate corpses shrunk to the size of a child and propped on the bare springs of the seats. Ten thousand dreams ensepulchred within their crozzled hearts."

Indulging with a kind of Keatsian voluptuousness in the spectacle of universal dissolution, McCarthy can yet on occasion dredge up images of haunting beauty from the grey sludge of his imagination. Walking on the desolate beach with his son, the man speculates: 'And perhaps beyond those shrouded swells another man did walk with another child on the dead gray sands. Slept but a sea apart on another beach among the bitter ashes of the world or stood in their rags lost to the same indifferent sun"

And, in the end, the road reasserts its old elusive promise of hope and deliverance: "You need to go on," the man says to his son, "You need to keep going. You don't know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You'll be lucky again. You'll see, Just go..."

For all its grim subversion of the values of the road novel, *The Road* returns to its irrepressible mantra: "Just go."

This perversely beautiful novel is finally a testimony to human endurance in the face of an indifferent sun.