

THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO CORMAC MCCARTHY'S



THE
ROAD

“Completely brilliant. It’s like being in a room with
marvellous tutors. You can’t really afford to be
without them, and they are a joy to read.”

JOANNA LUMLEY

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by David Isaacs

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Introduction

The Road is about a man and a boy trudging through a wasteland after the fall of civilisation.

Shortly after its publication in 2006, the American cultural critic Steven Shaviro wrote, “the novel actively repels commentary; it is so utterly self-contained, so hermetically sealed unto itself, that anything anybody does say about it is both superfluous and wrong”. In a review for the *New Republic* the influential literary critic James Wood had a similar warning against trying to find meaning in the book: “*The Road* is not a science fiction, not an allegory, and not a critique of the way we live now.” And yet no single novel published in the last ten years has inspired the volume of critical writing that McCarthy’s short book has, nor has been studied as much around the world. Shaviro and Wood – and they are not the only ones – are right to be cautious. But it seems the novel actively attracts commentary and does say something about the way we live now.

So how to write about the man and the boy without being superfluous and wrong? One of Cormac McCarthy’s great influences is the early 20th century novelist and short story writer Ernest Hemingway. When asked to explain the meaning of his story *The Old Man and the Sea* – in which an old man, urged on by a young boy, goes to sea and catches a gigantic fish, only for it to be eaten by

sharks – he had this to say:

“No good book has ever been written that has in it symbols arrived at beforehand and stuck in... I tried to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them good and true enough they would mean many things.”

The Road is a mysterious novel; it asks many more questions than it answers. Rather than looking for answers – for meaning – it’s probably more fruitful to ask questions about the man, boy and wasteland – about their world – and to see if McCarthy has made them good and true enough that they mean many things.

A summary of the plot

Not much happens in *The Road*. It is set in a future America, around ten years after some apocalyptic event has wiped out all animals, vegetation, and the entirety of civilisation. The dire conditions of life have forced the majority of those few people left alive into savagery and cannibalism. They gang together, hunt, kill and eat anyone who crosses their paths.

A man and his son are walking along America’s roads, heading to the coast, looking for a warmer

climate and trying to hide from anyone who might do them harm. They carry what few possessions they have in an old shopping trolley and survive by eating tinned food they scavenge from ruined towns. The boy’s mother killed herself not long after the unnamed catastrophic event, leaving the man and boy with only two bullets left in their gun: one for each of them. They are – the man tells his son – “the good guys.” The rest are “bad guys”.

On their journey they encounter many dangers, but also make some welcome discoveries: an underground bunker full of food and drink, for instance. When they reach the sea, the situation does not improve, so they head back inland. The man, who has been showing signs of illness, dies and the boy is approached by a family who seem, remarkably, to be other “good guys”. The novel ends as the boy walks off with them, to an uncertain future.

What have they lost?

We never find out how the world ends. McCarthy gives us little to go on: “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions”(54)*. That’s all we get. In interview

* Page numbers in the text are taken from the edition of the novel published by Alfred A. Knopf (New York) in 2006.

he is dismissive of any attempt to get to the bottom of it, as in this answer he gave to the *Wall Street Journal*:

A lot of people ask me. I don't have an opinion. [Some scientist friends] said it looked like a meteor to them. But it could be anything – volcanic activity, or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important. The whole thing now is, what do you do?

Plenty of commentators have seen *The Road* as a cautionary tale about climate change. In *The Guardian*, George Monbiot described it as “the most important environmental book ever written”; the critic Chris Danta called it “a profound ecological fable”. They may be right. To deny *The Road's* relevance to discussions about the climate and man's relationship with the environment would be short-sighted. But there is nothing in the novel to suggest the catastrophic event was man-made* or avoidable; it neither blames us nor suggests there's anything we could have done to stop it. And, as McCarthy's answer suggests, it is not really the point, anyway.

* The critic Carl James Grindley suggests there's textual evidence that it is not man-made but God-made: it is eerily close, he says, to the apocalypse as described in the Bible. Both “include fire from heaven, the trees and the grass all burned up, ships destroyed, all sea life dead, the sun and the moon blotted out, and so on”.

So what is the point? Novels don't exist in vacuums,* and once the question of how and why the world ended recedes, a clearer picture emerges of what real-world events *The Road* might be a response to. James Wood has suggested it's a “9/11 novel that is pretending not to be a 9/11 novel”. Many critics agree. In his book *The American Nightmare*, the Turkish critic Özden Sözalan argues that the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre mark the point at which the American Dream became the American Nightmare; American novelists have accordingly shifted their focus from dream to nightmare. He fashions his argument around two novels: *The Road* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. For DeLillo, 9/11 was a kind of “end of America” and his novel asks the question: “What comes after America?” “There's an empty space,” one of his characters says, “where America used to be.”

The man and the boy in *The Road* occupy that space. American ruins litter their landscape. They pass “billboards advertising motels” (6); “coins everywhere in the ash” (22); “small pleasureboats half sunken in the gray water” (24); “a burned house, just the brick chimney standing in in the

* Cormac McCarthy's novels in particular are often written in response to world events. His masterpiece, *Blood Meridian* – which follows, in gory detail, a band of cowboys massacring innocent people around the United States/Mexico border in the mid-18th century – was written in the wake of Vietnam, and deals with the national mood in America during and after that war.

yard” (107); “a once grand house sited on a rise above a road” (111). McCarthy has always written about founding American myths; here, post 9/11, he has created a myth of its destruction.

Often the man tries to recreate this old world for the boy, but to the boy it means nothing. They come across an abandoned train, for example, and the man climbs into the driver’s seat. “He made train noises and diesel horn noises but he wasn’t sure what these might mean to the boy”(192). Or, walking through a ruined house, he finds a phone, picks it up, pretends to dial a number. “The boy watched him. What are you doing? he said”(5). At one point, the man comes across an upturned “softdrink machine” (22) in which he finds an unopened can of coke. The boy has no idea what it is; it seems miraculous.

Recognisable and banal to us, to the boy these are mysterious relics from another world, like the ruins of Greece or Egypt in ours. For the boy, the real – our real – has become mythic. He regards these remains with a fascination that is alien to us. As the novelist Jennifer Egan pointed out in *Slate*, the boy “talks of crows, the sun... and the blue sea with the same mythical longing one hears in today’s children’s talk of queens and dragons”. The novel destabilises the apparent solidity of our world; what we take for granted, the novel says, is transient and mortal. A can of coke as relic and miracle: it is hard to read *The Road* and not see the

world with new eyes.

The most prominent American ruin in the novel is, of course, the road itself, which critics often read as a metonym* for capitalism. The road, its original purpose, its history and its connotations are all mysteries to the boy, who has probably never heard of capitalism or Henry Ford. Showing the boy his map – itself a symbol of existing within a community – the man tries to explain it:

*These are our roads, the black lines on the map.
The state roads.*

Why are they state roads?

Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states.

But there’s not any more states? No.

What happened to them?

I don’t know exactly. That’s a good question.

But the roads are still there.

Yes. For a while.

How long a while?

I don’t know. (43)

All these relics and ruins speak not only of a dead civilisation but also of a dead – or dying – language; one of McCarthy’s ongoing

* A metonym is a kind of metaphor in which a part of something is used to refer to its whole – for example, “Hollywood” meaning the American film industry, or “the suits” referring to the club managers at a football match.

preoccupations. (A brief diversion into 19th century Swiss linguistics: the 19th century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure posited an enormously influential theory of language. As Saussure conceived it, language is made up of signs: words are signs, but other things can be signs, too. The can of coke, the billboards, the pleasure boats, the road – they’re all signs, of a kind. They represent things beyond themselves. For Saussure a sign has two sides to it, like a coin: the *signifier* and the *signified*. The signifier is the word (or image) itself: its shape, its sound, its appearance. The signified is what it represents – the image or concept that appears in our mind when we hear or see the signifier.)

The world of *The Road* is one full of empty signs: that is, signifiers (words, objects etc...) that have nothing left to signify; signifier cut adrift from signified. Words remain, but the things they represent don’t; there are more words than things. At one point the man and boy come across an “advertisement in faded ten-foot letters across [a] roofslope. See Rock City” (20). Rock City is long gone, and in the way it explicitly draws its reader’s attention to something no longer there, this advertisement functions as a metonym for language in a post-apocalyptic world. Language and meaning are disconnected. In McCarthy’s words, “Everything uncoupled from its shoring” (10).

One response to a world with a superfluity of

language is a desire for silence. And, indeed, when the man remembers the perfect day from his childhood, a day spent collecting firewood with his uncle, it is significant that what he hones in on is how neither of them “had spoken a word... This is the day to shape the days upon” (12). As such, over the course of the novel the man and the boy say very little to one another. And when they do speak, it is usually for a purpose: to ask a question, to answer a question, to give a command, to express trepidation.

In one of the most famous passages from the book, the man tries to speak but finds he has nothing to say:

He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He’d had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (93)

This difficult passage describes the process by which words, cut adrift from the real objects,

people, places, thoughts, feelings that they once described, are beginning to disappear themselves. It's a tricky concept to grasp, so here's a thought experiment. Think of the word "green". Think of the colour that word refers to. Now imagine trying to explain that colour to a blind person, without actually using the word "green". You probably can't. Now imagine a world from which the colour green has been removed. There are still people alive who remember what the colour green was. But they can't explain it to their children. And one day, when no-one who remembers the colour green is left, the word "green" will just be an unanchored sound bobbing around, meaning nothing. After that, it will be gone.

What's the connection between a lost language and a lost state? The mid-20th century French philosopher Michel Foucault may have the answer. McCarthy seems to be interested in Foucault's notion of language as a kind of power. For Foucault, language creates and structures thought. Countries, states, create or seize control of their national language. As a result, they have power over national discourse. Language and discourse,* Foucault believed, create and structure truth within a community. To put it succinctly: states create language and language creates truth. In *The Road*,

* That is, an accepted body of thoughts and ideas expressed through language within a specific community (in this case, America).

the state has vanished and language is on its way out.

Where does that leave truth? Has truth vanished, too? Is truth something relative, chained to the people who believe it, something that differs depending on who or where you are? Or is truth something transcendent and objective; a fixed, unchanging reality? Is reality, in other words, created by language? McCarthy's novels are peopled with characters who believe both – from a church caretaker in *The Crossing*, who says "this world which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale", to the cowboy John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses* who, in response to the suggestion from his girlfriend that "everything is talk" replies: "Not everything." McCarthy himself has not offered an answer.

Before moving on to discuss what the man and the boy have, it is important to stress that the world has not ended. All is not lost. As Margaret Atwood recently said, in relation to her trilogy of post-apocalyptic novels, *MaddAddam*, you "can't actually wipe out the human race and then tell a story about it. There has to be somebody still alive through whom you can hear that story. It's like that conundrum of where will I go after I die. You're still imagining an 'I'." There is no such thing as *post-apocalypse*.

And, strictly speaking, McCarthy is not writing about endings. He's writing – and always has been – about entropy. There's a difference. Entropy – a