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REFERENCES

London and New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011. Pp. 225. ISBN: 0826438202

- 1 This volume of essays from Continuum titled *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road* (2011) aims to situate three of McCarthy's late, and most widely read and studied works, in the context of contemporary critical debate. The essays contribute to the ever growing critical industry around the author, whose prominence within contemporary American literature is undisputed, a status bolstered by Harold Bloom's comment that McCarthy is among the four major American novelists of the current time, alongside Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon and Philip Roth. Each study in the new Continuum series presents ten original essays by subject specialists on the recent fiction of a significant author working in the United States or Canada, and takes recent fiction to be novels published since 1990. In considering an author such as McCarthy who has already reached canonical status within North American letters, the book takes the opportunity to consider authors of his stature within the dual context of the contemporary era and as part of a long career. The interpretations the book's essays offer are broad in focus and are grouped around each of the three novels the collection covers. Each cluster of three essays from different critics on a specific novel is framed by a short introduction by the collection editor, Sara L. Spurgeon that flags up points of connection and contrast between the different approaches presented.
- 2 Spurgeon's introductory essay sets out to establish the context for the following essay chapters by discussing overarching elements such as the writer's biography,

characteristic narrative strategies, themes and principal concerns. This first essay situates McCarthy within the American canon and justifies the selection of the three novels covered by the volume as being chosen “for their literary value, diversity of styles, the growing body of critical work engaging them, and their genre-crossing characteristics” (2). The most recent of which, *The Road* (2006), for example, has been variously categorized as a work of post-apocalyptic, post-nuclear, and environmental fiction, as well as futuristic sci-fi, and named as ‘a love story’ by Oprah Winfrey. Spurgeon goes on to appraise the progression of McCarthy’s literary craft by breaking his oeuvre down into distinct periods and phases, addressed chronologically: the Southern/Appalachian novels (his first four works from *The Orchard Keeper* in 1965 to *Suttree* in 1979), Southwestern Gothic (*Blood Meridian* from 1985 and the Border Trilogy that followed) and the new territory of *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006). Spurgeon positions McCarthy’s early works in the Southern Gothic tradition, indebted to Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor. She singles out *Blood Meridian* as a transitional novel that fuses the Southern Gothic and the Western traditions and demonstrates a reinvention of McCarthy’s prose and scope through a much more complex handling of history, a complexity that prefigures the Border Trilogy. She sees these novels as offering a thoroughgoing critique of the myths of the Western by subverting it – and the attendant notion of Manifest Destiny – from within, “forcing readers to confront the racism, greed, and brutal violence that accompanied westward expansion” (10). She believes that McCarthy achieves something similar to the Southern Gothic tradition here, which critiqued the inherited myths of the post-Civil War South: hence the definitional term she uses, Southwestern Gothic. Spurgeon then goes on to discuss McCarthy’s third phase, heralded by the appearance of *No Country for Old Men*, a novel that confounded critics by exhibiting an unorthodox structure and innovative new textual features, as well as seeming to blend and exist between various genres, the crime novel, detective fiction, and film noir among them. This novel is allied with *The Road* by Spurgeon in McCarthy’s most recent authorial phase by virtue of its distinctive rhetorical and stylistic characteristics, most remarkably a new minimalist style. This periodic framing of McCarthy’s literary career offers an accessible way to approach the development of his craft. Spurgeon also summarises some of the most interesting new routes of enquiry into McCarthy’s work, including a focus on dynamics of class through post-Marxist, post-capitalist and globalization studies lenses, and through the emerging fields of ecocritical theory, post-human and animal studies, all approaches reflected in the volume.

- 3 The collection’s first three essays on *All the Pretty Horses* succeed collectively in complicating our understanding of character in the novel, as Linda Woodson’s chapter unpicks the charge that the book is misogynistic by showing the depth of female characterization it exhibits and how narrative action is in fact steered by women, while Stacy Peebles’ chapter shows how the novel’s male protagonist evolves across typescript, novel and film, in a study that utilises both genetic criticism and an analysis of screen adaptations as modes of appraisal. In Part II on *No Country for Old Men*, the chapters grapple with the novel’s complex handling of ethics within the context of the violence of the US-Mexican border on which the work focuses. Particularly strikingly, Jay Ellis’ chapter invites us to see the novel’s psychopathic hitman, Chigurh, “as a Socratic figure who... engages in extended dialogue intended to help his victims see what they could not before see, that their past actions, in conjunction with chance events, have determined their fated end at his hands” (96). This notion of instrumental

evil more subtly apprehends the moral function of the character of Chigurh, and is built upon by Dan Flory's suggestion that in the film adaptation of the novel, the figure Chigurh challenges audiences ability to comprehend evil and to think more reflectively in order "to find ways to improve on that understanding by incorporating this antagonist into the realm of humanity" (132). In the book's final part on *The Road*, the three chapters variously grapple with the ethical implications of the novel's central characters' behaviour and choices within a wasted, unfamiliar world (what Donovan Gwinner calls their 'survivalist consequentialism' borne out of 'postapocalyptic pragmatism'), the function of the novel as a critical allegory of a hyperabundant America and the notion of a social order in crisis reflected in environmental decline, and finally the working through of a new definitional category for the novel beyond what Dana Phillips sees as the lazily applied genre label of 'post-apocalyptic fiction'.

- 4 The chapters that comprise this essay collection are all rich contributions to the study of McCarthy and actively embrace many of the new critical trends that circulate around the author's work, helping us to apprehend his relevance in fresh and illuminating ways (the consistent focus on film studies was welcome given the remarkable success of screen adaptations of his later novels). One criticism concerns the structure of the book: the chapters are grouped around each of the three novels rather than around specific themes or critical approaches. This means that points of comparison and contrast beyond the same textual object of study are largely implicit, although the short introductions to the devoted sections for each novel attempt to address this. The book's intention to provide a broad focus is not always realized in some of the essay chapters that present more narrow, nuanced appreciation of certain aspects of the respective text rather than bold, broad reappraisals. In general, though, I found that the book provided an accessible analysis of these three recent McCarthy works from an impressive diversity of perspectives that situate this crucial author within the contemporary cultural moment of North America.

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