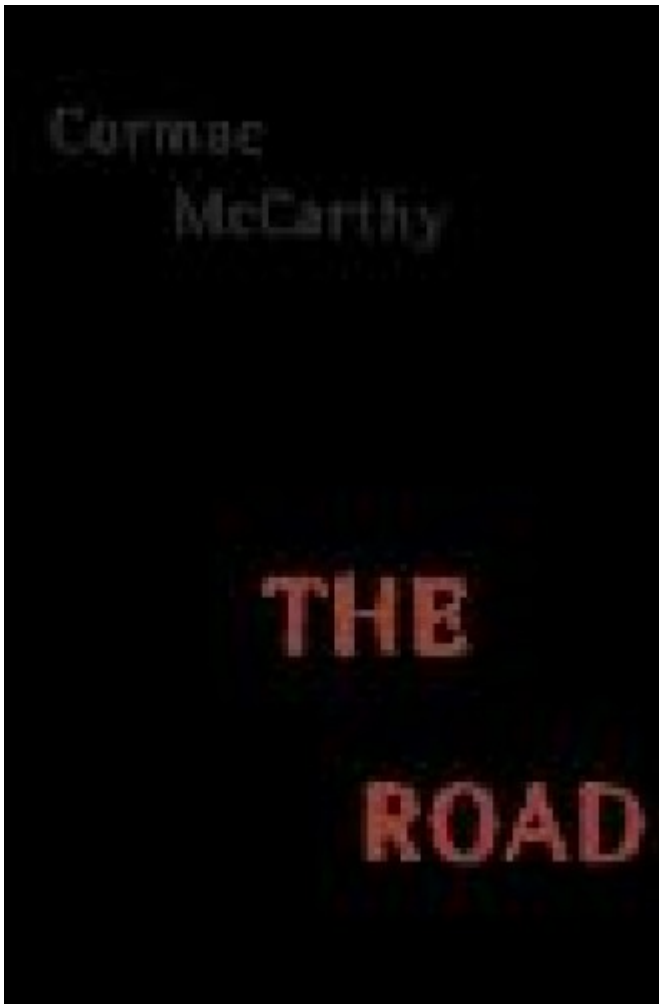


The Road

reviewed by [Todd Shy](#) in the [March 6, 2007](#) issue

In Review



The Road

Cormac McCarthy
Knopf

The Book of Job feels unnecessarily long, but we tolerate the repetition because the final payoff is powerful. Along the way, the arguments against Job form concentric

cages of folly, cant, common sense and basic theology, and Job must either accept being their prisoner or stage some kind of personal break. *The Road* is not a modern retelling of the biblical poem, but in its repetitious gloom, its relentless punishment of the main characters and, most important, the lateness of its rupture it mirrors Job's trajectory. In Job, it is chapter 38 of 42 before God interrupts the human debate and declaims from the whirlwind; the departure in *The Road*—a final human affirmation—begins somewhere around page 233 of 241. Up to that point, Cormac McCarthy's tale is patient to the point of being hypnotic, and the story enacts its own slow expiration. Only at the last minute does the bleakness sit up to offer a deathbed declaration, and the success of the novel depends on whether this conclusion is convincing.

The Road tracks the journey of an unnamed father and son as they wander across a postapocalyptic wasteland. Though we never learn exactly what calamity has transpired, the landscape is utterly ruined and covered in ash. Wildlife is absent, and the surviving human population is so sparse and desolate that every remote stranger is both competitor and threat. Pushing a shopping cart of salvaged possessions with a direction in mind (south) but no real destination (there is no safe place to go), father and son make the dangerous passage speaking essentially only to each other. On the way they discover a bomb shelter with a cache of canned food, a man burned by a lightning strike, prisoners huddled against the approach of their cannibal captors, an ash-shrouded locomotive, a nearly blind old man who tries to steal their supplies, numerous corpses (including, most gruesomely, a charred infant on a campfire spit), and a small boy they cannot help, whose memory haunts the son to the end of the novel. The horror, in other words, is unrelieved, and we feel that McCarthy, our great chronicler of violence, is filling out his oeuvre with a projection of ultimate destruction.

In the wake of apocalypse, reconstituting human life is a grim, uncertain business. McCarthy's fragmented style throughout suggests that human speech and human narrative must also—like other primitive skills—be reconstituted. And so the code of simple survival for his characters has as its analogue the pared-down, halting, mythical rhythms of the prose. In those places where the language is both beautiful and terrifying, the parallel is just right: "Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence."

Too much of the novel advances, however, with plodding steps, and the effort to suggest the primitive becomes straightforward tedium: “He took a screwdriver from a coffee can and opened the handle. Inside were four new blades. He took out the old blade and laid it on the shelf and put in one of the new ones and screwed the handle back together and retracted the blade and put the cutter in his pocket. Then he picked up the screwdriver and put that in his pocket as well.” This reader then reached for his cup of coffee and took a long sip. Then he set the mug back down.

The most critical component in *The Road* is the relationship between the father and his son. At one level they embody a very simple instinct: the unconquerable love between parent and child. And when the boy proves to be more sensitive than his father toward strangers in need, we see another primitive instinct—that of childlike simplicity, in all its generosity and naïveté. But there is a shadow side to their relationship. The boy’s mother committed suicide before they set out, and the father has clearly pondered whether to kill both his son and himself rather than succumb to postapocalypse predation. In this respect, their journey is a darker version of Abraham and Isaac’s. The father, like Abraham, packs a weapon, but here both father and son may be sacrificed before an inscrutable, destructive god.

Yet when the dying father—whose pistol always has two bullets at the ready—must send his son out on his own, he refuses Abraham’s terrible gesture: “I cant [sic]. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant.” With this dying scene—the last eight pages of the book—McCarthy evokes an improbable vision of redemption and goodness. Telling his son that he must “carry the fire” and find “the good guys,” he assures him that he will be spared. And when the son mentions again the lost boy they could not help, the father offers lofty reassurance: “Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again.”

This would all be understandable deathbed sentiment were it not for the book’s swift conclusion. After the father dies, a family of the good guys immediately rescues the son, and as he joins them back on the road, the mother teaches the boy that “the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all time.” McCarthy ends the narrative with a description of a natural world that is older than human dilemmas and that “hummed of mystery.”

Nothing has prepared us for this abrupt suggestion of hope. The boy’s goodness throughout is innocent rather than prophetic. Nothing has encouraged a belief that the good guys might reconstitute the earth. These last eight pages of *The Road* are therefore startling, and the optimism—grittier than the final chapter of Job, but

similarly incongruous—is emotionally understandable, yet artistically unearned. The frisson of Abraham raising the knife and the friction between Jehovah and Job dissolve here in the elegant cadences of McCarthy’s vision. It seems stingy to criticize the flash of hope; who doesn’t want the world, in the end, to hum with mystery? But we need the mystery to pull us through by confronting the horror. Sidestepped, it can’t assure us of its triumph.