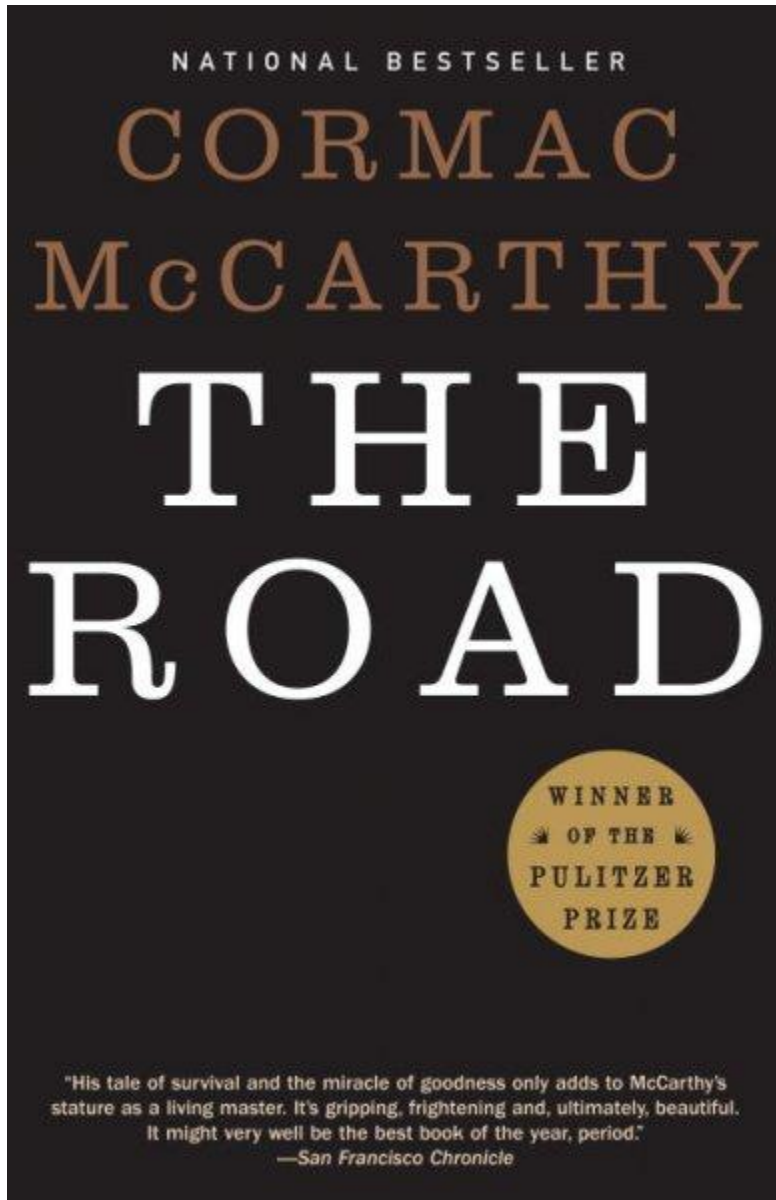


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308881>

About the Book *Source:*

<http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/road1.asp>



Set in the smoking ashes of a postapocalyptic America, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* tells the story of a man and his son's journey toward the sea and an uncertain salvation. The world they pass through is a ghastly vision of scorched countryside and blasted cities "held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell" [p. 181]. It is a starved world, all plant and animal life dead or dying, some of the few human survivors even eating each other alive.

The father and son move through the ruins searching for food and shelter, trying to keep safe from murderous, roving bands.

They have only a pistol to defend themselves, the clothes they are wearing, a cart of scavenged food--and each other.

Awesome in the totality of its vision, *The Road* is an unflinching meditation on the worst and the best that we are capable of: ultimate destructiveness, desperate tenacity, and the tenderness that keeps two people alive in the face of total devastation.

About the Author

Cormac McCarthy is frequently compared with such Southern-based writers as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor. A Dictionary of Literary Biography contributor stated that McCarthy's work has in common with that of the others "a rustic and sometimes dark humor, intense characters, and violent plots; [he] shares as well their development of universal themes within a highly particularized fictional world, their seriousness of vision, and their vigorous exploration of the English language." "His characters are often outcasts--destitutes or criminals, or both," wrote Richard B. Woodward in the New York Times Magazine. Throughout his career, McCarthy has actively avoided public attention, refusing to participate in lecture tours and seldom granting interviews.

In keeping with McCarthy's reclusive nature, little is known about his early life. He was born Charles McCarthy, Jr., in Providence, Rhode Island, on July 20, 1933, the third of six children in an Irish Catholic family. "Sometime later, he or his family--no one seems to know which--changed his name to Cormac after Cormac McCarthy, the Irish chieftain who built Blarney Castle," explained Texas Monthly contributor Michael Hall. When Cormac was four, he and his family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, where his father got a job as an attorney for the powerful Tennessee Valley Authority. After high school, McCarthy studied engineering at the University of Tennessee, then entered the U.S. Air Force. He served in Alaska for a couple of years before returning to Tennessee and reentering the university. He married twice, having a son, Cullen, with his first wife, and living for a period in a renovated barn on a pig farm with his second wife. In 1976, he moved to Texas, the source of much of his inspiration for his most famous works.

Reviews

Library Journal *Starred Review*

Winner of the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, McCarthy (*All the Pretty Horses*) here offers a prescient account of a man and his son trying to survive in a devastated country where food is scarce and everyone has become a scavenger. The term survival of the fittest rings true here; very few people remain, and friends are extinct. Essentially, this is a story about nature vs. nurture, commitment and promises, and though there aren't many characters, there is abundant life in the prose. We are reminded how McCarthy has mastered the world outside of our domestic and social circles, with each description reading as if he had pulled a scene from the landscape and pasted it in the book. He uses metaphors the way some writers use punctuation, sprinkling them about with an artist's eye, showing us that literature from the heart still exists.

Kirkus * Starred Review *

Even within the author's extraordinary body of work, this stands as a radical achievement, a novel that demands to be read and reread.

McCarthy pushes his thematic obsessions to their extremes in a parable that reads like *Night of the Living Dead* as rewritten by Samuel Beckett. Where much of McCarthy's fiction has been set in the recent past of the South and West, here he conjures a nightmare of an indeterminate future. A great fire has left the country covered in layers of ash and littered with incinerated corpses. Foraging through the wasteland are a father and son, neither named (though the son calls the father "Papa"). The father dimly remembers the world as it was and occasionally dreams of it. The son was born on the cusp of whatever has happened—apocalypse? Holocaust?—and has never known anything else. His mother committed suicide rather than face the unspeakable horror. As they scavenge for survival, they consider themselves the "good guys," carriers of the fire, while most of the few remaining survivors are "bad guys," cannibals who eat babies. In order to live, they must keep moving amid this shadowy landscape, in which ashes have all but obliterated the sun. In their encounters along their pilgrimage to the coast, where things might not be better but where they can go no further, the boy emerges as the novel's moral conscience. The relationship between father and son has a sweetness that represents all that's good in a universe where conventional notions of good and evil have been extinguished. Amid the bleakness of survival—through which those who wish they'd never been born struggle to persevere—there are

glimmers of comedy in an encounter with an old man who plays the philosophical role of the Shakespearean fool. Though the sentences of McCarthy's recent work are shorter and simpler than they once were, his prose combines the cadence of prophecy with the indelible images of poetry.

A novel of horrific beauty, where death is the only truth.

Literary Criticism

"Maps of the world in its becoming": post-apocalyptic naming in Cormac McCarthy's The Road

Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning tenth novel *The Road* (2006) gives us a vision of after: after the world has come to disaster, after any tangible social order has been destroyed by fire or hunger or despair. McCarthy here surrenders his mythologizing of the past, envisioning instead a post-apocalyptic future in which human existence has been reduced to the basics. (1) Though the book remains silent on the exact nature of the disaster that befell the planet some ten years prior, the grim results are clear. No plants grow, no sun shines through the ash-plagued sky and, save a single dog, no animals survive. The dead outnumber the living in shocking proportion, and of those few living humans, most are barely human at all: they are "men who would eat your children in front of your eyes," members of "bloodcults" bearing lead pipes and marching with chained slaves and catamites in tow (*The Road* 152, 14). (2) The protagonists--an unnamed man and his young son--push a shopping cart across the wasted earth, freezing, starving and threatened at every turn, in search of the sea and in hope of a warmer, more hospitable place. Given the horrific devastation, we are not surprised that language also has been returned to its rudiments and now must be re-imagined. This task is well-suited to McCarthy, who since the early days of *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) has demonstrated considerable stylistic facility and flexibility. Yet critics have generally shown little interest in McCarthy's style, preferring instead to "talk about what he's talking about" (Ellis 157). (3)

Scholarly debate over what McCarthy is talking about has often focused on the issue of meaning versus meaninglessness. In *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, Vereen M. Bell lays out the view of McCarthy as nihilist, identifying in the author's first six novels little by way of plot, theme or

character self-consciousness and motivation. (4) For Bell, these missing elements amount to "McCarthy's metaphysic summarized: none, in effect--no first principles, no foundational truth" (Achievement 9). (5) Maiming, killing and the defiling of corpses, on the other hand, figure prominently in the novels, and this "violence tends to be just that; it is not a sign or symbol of something else" (Phillips 435). The emphasis on violence notwithstanding, Edwin T. Arnold challenges the popular nihilist thesis, asserting that there is "always the possibility of grace and redemption even in the darkest of his tales," though such redemption requires more of McCarthy's characters than they seem capable of giving ("Naming" 46). Nowhere in McCarthy's oeuvre is violence so total and triumphant--and redemption so elusive--as in *Blood Meridian*, which details the exploits of a band of scalp hunters, Glanton's gang, in the nineteenth-century American southwest. Widely regarded as McCarthy's masterpiece, this historically based novel neglects the issue of ethics, not even "pointing out the conspicuous absence of moral positions" (Guillemin 240), and belies a search for redemptive meaning (Shaviro 148). (6) But while grace and redemption are at best tenuous, unrealized possibilities in prior McCarthy novels, in *The Road* these aspects fundamentally drive the narrative: out of love for his child and hope for some salvation, the man pushes himself to the point of death to preserve the child's physical and spiritual safety. Thus reviewer Michael Chabon's claim that *The Road* is "not a departure from but a return to McCarthy's most brilliant genre work, combined in a manner we have not seen since *Blood Meridian*" (116) (7) completely misses, or ignores, the essential difference between these novels. (8)

True, both *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* are chockfull of unforgettable horrors, awash with blood and gore and threat. Despite these similarities, however, *The Road's* divergence from McCarthy's previous work is especially evident when the novel is contrasted with *Blood Meridian* because their styles and concomitant worldviews differ so strikingly. (9) In *Blood Meridian* "War is god" (249), linguistically and metaphysically. The novel "sings hymns of violence" (Shaviro 145) in prose often allusive and baroque to the breaking point, prose frequently likened to that of William Faulkner. The style of *The Road*, on the contrary, is pared down, elemental, a triumph over the dead echoes of the abyss and, alternately, over relentless ironic gesturing. And it is precisely in *The Road's* language that we discover the seeds of the work's unexpectedly optimistic worldview. The novel, I argue, is best understood as a linguistic journey toward redemption, a search for meaning and pattern in a seemingly meaningless

world--a search that, astonishingly, succeeds. Specifically, I demonstrate how McCarthy's odd approach to naming establishes the conditions for a New Earth, a New Eden. (10) In the redemption of language, *The Road* suggests, we discover the hope for our redemption.

MCCARTHY'S NEW ETHICS: THE "GOOD GUYS"

Writing after the publication of McCarthy's seventh novel, *The Crossing* (1994), Arnold notes the difficulty of identifying good and evil in McCarthy's work ("Naming" 54). Indeed, protagonists such as *Outer Dark's* (1968) Culla Holme, who rapes his sister and leaves their newborn child to die; *Child of God's* (1974) necrophiliac murderer Lester Ballard; and *Suttree's* (1979) eponymous antihero deny the reader any ethical or moral identification that might normally be expected. Moreover, McCarthy's own reticence about putting his characters' thoughts and feelings on the page encourages a sense of disconnection and suggests for Bell and others that the characters have no thoughts and feelings, that they entertain no ethical considerations in the performance of their actions. "The overarching theme in McCarthy's work has been the face-off of good and evil with evil invariably triumphant through the bloodiest possible slaughter," and had this extended to *The Road*, says reviewer William Kennedy, the novel's focus would be the road-wandering marauders and cannibals (10). But they are not. Here the protagonists are the "good guys": a sympathetic, likeable middle-aged man and his young child (*TR* 65).

In the world of *The Road*, basic differences divide the good from the bad. As with the novel's other characters, the man and child lack proper names, but prior to the novel's advent, the father has given the two a collective designation that highlights their underlying nature: he and the boy are the "good guys" who, Prometheus-like, are "carrying the fire" as they search for other "good guys" (*TR* 70). Their status as good guys inheres in, if nothing else, their refusal to eat people or dogs. This is fact enough to separate them from the "bad guys": cannibals who feast on human cattle chained in a basement or those responsible for "a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (78, 167). (11) In fact, some years before the novel's opening, the boy's mother committed suicide in fear of falling prey to such atrocities. The father ponders a similar fate not a few times, but he does not acquiesce to suicide's lure; rather, he honors his responsibility. "My job is to take care of you," he tells the child, "I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (65).

Although the father commits acts that, by our present standards, if not immoral and unethical, are at least reprehensible, he does these things solely for the safety of the child. (12) And early on, the pair's journey acquires an explicitly religious quality, a sense of divine mission reinforced by the antonomastic refrain of "good guys"--that is, the substituting of this phrase for their proper names--and the repetition of "carrying the fire," phrases that become incantatory in the manner of a litany or a prayer.

This religious quality extends to the novel's overall approach to character naming, which demonstrates a search for the prelapsarian eloquence lost in the postlapsarian babble. This is a search not simply for the original names given the world by Adam, but also, more fundamentally, for the God-given capacity to name the world correctly. The novel's treatment of its only "properly" named character, the nearly blind old traveler who calls himself "Ely," illustrates this negotiation with language. (13) "Ely what?" asks the father, to which the old man responds, "What's wrong with Ely?" (TR 141). His reticence about offering personal information is immediately clear and is underscored when the father asks his age and "what line of work" he's in (144). "I'm not anything," Ely insists (145). *Outer Dark's* bone-chilling gang leader says, "They say people in hell ain't got names. But they had to be called somethin to get sent there" (235-36), (14) and if we liken *The Road's* burned earth to hell, we must recognize the man's efforts at naming Ely as attempts to find a way out of hell, a search for and belief in an alternative. When pressed about his name, the old man ultimately admits that "Ely" is a lie, saying of his real name, "I couldn't trust you with it. To do something with it. I don't want anybody talking about me. To say where I was or what I said when I was there. I mean, you could talk about me maybe. But nobody could say that it was me. I could be anybody" (TR 144-45). Without a "real" name, Ely cannot be held responsible for his words and deeds. He is, in essence, un-tethered, wandering the road beholden to no one and nothing, and thus escaping punishment (whether God's or that of another man on the road, we are never sure). But ultimately, the narrative rejects the lie that is "Ely"--the idea that a person can invent a convenient identity to hide who he is and what he has done. All that the father knows for sure of this stranger is that he is an "old man"; hence this is the most accurate and truthful thing to call him and the name that the narrative relies on.

More typical of McCarthy are the more than seventy named characters of *Blood Meridian* (Kirves 337-53). Most of the named characters in this novel

are murderers whose names serve to document atrocious human deeds.¹⁵ For example, the scalp hunter Long Webster (not to be confused with his cohort Marcus Webster) is first named when he "swung the howitzer and steadied it," leaving "upward of a dozen of the Yumas ... dead or writhing in the sand" (BM 261). McCarthy names him, singles him out, precisely to attribute terrible actions to him, to demonstrate the very human capacity for horror. Like Long Webster's, many characters' names are reported either just prior to or following some atrocity. Another of Glanton's gang, for instance, "a man from the east named Gilchrist," is named only once and only because he and three others ("the last of the Delwares and ... the Vandiemlander") are found :

hanging head downward from the limbs of a fireblackened paloverde tree. They were skewered through the cords of their heels with sharpened shuttles of green wood and they hung gray and naked above the dead ashes of the coals where they'd been roasted until their heads had charred and the brains bubbled in the skulls and steam sang from their noseholes. Their tongues were drawn out and held with sharpened sticks thrust through them and they had been docked of their ears and their torsos were sliced open with flints until the entrails hung down on their chests. (226-27)

Gilchrist's name connects this evil (and lusciously depicted) deed with a human, reminding the reader that this horror is committed against a person. Yet the novel's names create no distinction between the good and the bad by distinguishing one who suffers the deed from one who commits it: Gilchrist, like the rest of the cast of characters, is himself a murderer, unjustified and unrepentant. Despite its "humanness," a proper name in *Blood Meridian* does not separate a man from his fellow men, but rather stains the whole race. In this novel, all men are evil. And, ultimately, they are all unmourned by the other characters and--importantly--by the reader as well.

Free as it is of proper names, *The Road* often relies on pronouns for character identification. Short by nature, pronouns allow McCarthy to emphasize the characters' deeds by drawing away as little attention as possible from action verbs, as is evident in the following passage, in which the man and boy engage a knife-wielding marauder:

He was a big man but he was very quick. He dove and grabbed the boy and rolled and came up holding him against his chest with the knife at his throat. The man had already dropped to the ground and he swung with him and leveled the pistol and fired from a two-handed position balanced on both knees at a distance of six feet. The man fell back instantly and lay with blood bubbling from the hole in his forehead. The boy was lying in his lap with no expression on his face at all. He shoved the pistol in his belt and slung the knapsack over his shoulder and picked up the boy and turned him around and lifted him over his head and set him on his shoulders and set off up the old roadway at a dead run, holding the boy's knees, the boy clutching his forehead, covered with gore and mute as a stone. (TR 56)

The focus here is on action--"dove," "grabbed," "rolled," "dropped," "swung," "leveled," "fired," "fell," "shoved," "slung," "lifted"--and the passage's style demands that we judge a man, that we know him, by the nature of his deeds, not by the name he is called. We must read who he is, determine his inherent goodness or vileness, by the actions he commits with regard to other men. It is simple and essential. Furthermore, the confusion we might first feel (or at least expect) about pronouns and agency, about who is doing what, is subverted because the characters' actions make clear who they are. In this single dramatic instance, for example, the character to whom the pronouns "he," "him," and "his" refer switches some twelve times, nine of the pronouns lack grammatically correct antecedents, and the phrase "The man" that begins consecutive sentences refers in the first to the father and in the second to the "roadrat." Despite this, the characters are clearly knowable and differentiable from one another by what they do. And, in a world where ethical and moral distinctions matter, they can be taken to task for what they do, at least by the reader, if not by some authority within the text.

The pronouns in *Blood Meridian* at times seem purposely to lack clarity, suggesting the interchangeability of actors and actions, but, while *The Road* favors pronouns more heavily than *Blood Meridian* or any other McCarthy work, its pronouns are very clear and correspond to the sharp difference between good and evil. That McCarthy has identified this distinction suggests a hopeful turn in his fiction: if the characters (and the reader) can draw the line between right and wrong, then that which is right and good can be identified with, championed and possibly attained. Even Chabon, who reads the main characters' journey as essentially futile, concedes that "we are rooting for them, pulling for them, from the first--and

so, we suspect, is the author" (117). Indeed, the reader has greater access to the father's thoughts than to those of any other McCarthy character, and as a result he is rounder, fuller and more sympathetic. He is someone the reader can imagine chatting with every morning before work at the bus stop, were this a world with jobs and bus stops. The failure of the father's lungs at *The Road's* end is heartrending, and his death is made bearable only because the great sacrifice of his labored journey secures for the child a hopeful future. Though the sea is neither warm nor blue as the child had dreamed, he is found by a family of four, the new "good guys," and with them he can continue to carry the fire.

"CAUTERIZED TERRAIN": MAKING SPACE FOR A NEW EDEN

The Road's face-off between good and evil occurs on terrain far more hospitable to evil, as in any McCarthy novel. Like *Blood Meridian's* sun-bleached plains, the gray road stretches long and desolate, offering nowhere to hide. Indeed the "cauterized terrain" of *The Road* is reminiscent of the "cauterized waste" of the western novel's Sonoran desert (*TR* 12; *BM* 204). Despite obvious similarities among the settings, however, McCarthy's stylistic presentation of place in *The Road* differs significantly from that of his previous works. (16) Specifically, the narrative offers very few proper place names, and of the handful contained in the book, none is a marker of the story's action. (17) To the question of where the characters are located, then, reviewer Tom Chiarella answers, "There's no way to know. The names of cities have been forgotten" (94). But the text does not bear out this assertion. The man demonstrates considerable familiarity with the locales through which he and the boy pass, and the boy "had the names of towns and rivers by heart" (*TR* 181). And McCarthy, who always "carefully charts his characters' movements from street to street or town to town--you can follow them on maps if you wish" (Arnold, "*Blood and Grace*" 11), has just as meticulously crafted this pair's journey: the man and boy do follow an "oilcompany roadmap"--in pieces and numbered by crayon, but a map nonetheless (*TR* 36). The narrative's strategy is actually one of withholding place names, a provocative rhetorical move that forces the reader to imagine new possibilities, to think not solely in terms of the world that was, but also of the world that will be. The burned out landscape, strangely, is a new if unlikely Eden awaiting once again those perfect names.

In simplest terms, the proper place names of the pre-apocalyptic world have become obsolete. The world of *The Road* lacks organized

governments, religions and economies, essential social structures that we readers take for granted, and thus is bereft of those classifications that would help to place the characters in the physical sense: country, state, county, city. Pointing at the map, the man explains to the boy,

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

Why are they the state roads?

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

But there's not any more states?

The man's addendum--"What used to be called the states"--points to the names' lack of relevance in the novel's present. The states are no longer states, so calling the roads "state roads" is merely a throwback, and a term that, of course, means nothing to the child who was not yet alive during the time of the past civilization. To read this strategy as a nihilistic voiding of the places in the world as the reader knows it, though, would be a mistake. Rather, as the past world itself becomes meaningless, *The Road* suggests, the names of the past become meaningless as well. This is not to say that meaning has gone out of the world. The point here is that the nature of the meaning has changed: the method of naming McCarthy uses offers a refiguring of meaning in the language of the new, post-apocalyptic world.

This meaning inheres in the very human elements of the world. As such, the style here is distinctly hopeful for its focus on the good guys' survival. For what matter is the distinction between Tennessee and Georgia, or, for that matter, between Tennessee and Timbuktu, in a world devoid of the social structures that give meaning and function to the distinctions? The number of miles between points A and B, one's location with regard to a body of potable water--these are the important matters of geography in McCarthy's "feverland" (*TR* 24). For example, the man "thought they had enough food to get through the mountains but there was no way to tell. The pass at the watershed was five thousand feet and it was going to be very cold" (25). Here, place is calculated by the characters and related to the reader in terms of food and warmth. Descriptions such as this one convey information of vital importance to the characters on their journey, information that helps them to get their bearings and ultimately to survive. At another point the man "sat crosslegged in the leaves at the crest of a

ridge and glassed the valley below them with the binoculars. The still poured shape of a river. The dark brick stacks of a mill. Slate roofs. An old wooden watertower bound with iron hoops. No smoke, no movement of life" (66). These details are essential for assessing danger: the starving pair need to enter the city to search for food, and while still-standing buildings and a river could suggest the presence of dangerous people, the lack of smoke and movement indicates otherwise.

Omitting the names of the pre-apocalyptic world allows the ruined places (and the ruined civilization of which they were a part) to be left in the past. *Blood Meridian*, conversely, is intent on commemorating the destruction, on preserving its place in history. Riding through the American southwest and northern Mexico, the scalp hunters come upon an array of devastated towns, plagued by the language of ruin: Carizal "had fallen almost to ruin" (BM 174-75); Santa Cruz "was much reduced from its former estate and many of the buildings were uninhabited and ruinous" (220); Tubac is "abandoned" (226); and "on the outskirts of the presidio of Tucson" are "the ruins of several haciendas and ... more roadside markers where people had been murdered" (227). Those places not already spoiled are overrun by Glanton's men, and here they murder indiscriminately, burn buildings and destroy property, such as when they "massacred a pueblo on the Nacozari River" (204). The documenting of the names of these places is a documenting of the deeds done there. After the wholesale slaughter of "peaceful Tiguas camped on the river," the narrator asserts that "in the circuit of few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased" (173, 174), but McCarthy's manner of telling ensures it will not be so. Not only does McCarthy narrate with a bloody specificity the violence perpetrated in the novel's locales, but he also memorializes the sites of loss and atrocity, stamping their names forever into memory. Man's dwelling places--many of which no longer exist in the present day--are worthy of documentation only because of their destruction, for "If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay" (307).

But where is *The Road's* road? Using the narrative's place descriptions and their similarities to real places in McCarthy's earlier works, Chabon, Wesley G. Morgan and others have placed the action in the southeastern U.S.¹⁸ The novel returns to the fictional terrain of McCarthy's first four books, all of which are set in the American southeast. The setting's physical return to the site of McCarthy's earliest works all the more strengthens the meaning of the author's stylistic departure in representing this setting. The physical

return signals a return to the beginning, to a time before all was tarnished and destroyed, a time characterized by potential. Finding a new way to talk about this now-destroyed region implies the possibility of renewal. The old might become new again, once more meaningful and pure, in a new world with a new language that can make it so.

By divesting the post-apocalyptic landscape of those names that signify the now ruined world, *The Road* frees both character and reader from the chains of the old language. Eliminating the old suggests the coming of the new and creates a space in which the new world can be imagined and called into being. The slate, of course, has not been entirely cleaned; the corpses of the old world, both literal and figurative, are everywhere. The world posed by McCarthy's novel exists at a decidedly proto-Edenic moment: it is still in the stages of becoming, with regard to both form and content. But this world's very existence in the face of such unlikely odds is itself the hopeful suggestion of an alternative to stark existential nothingness. The fact that the characters refuse to fall back on the old methods of naming demonstrates their belief in a better way to name and a better world of which to speak, even if they (and the novel) have not yet found these things. Just as something optimistic propels the characters through the ashen landscape--a hope for warmth, for safety, for more good guys--the optimistic naming scheme propels the reader to imagine other possibilities. While the language of *Blood Meridian* memorializes slaughter, rendering destruction historical and permanent, the language of *The Road* begins to set both characters and readers free from the ruin.

THE "BEST GUY": THE NEW ADAM

That the earth on which the characters trek is yet properly unnamed tells the reader that neither the man nor the narrator is the Adam who will give a new language to the new Eden. Each is of the old, pre-apocalyptic world; each began his story there, came into language there and failed there. But the boy is different. Born several days after the apocalyptic "long shear of light" and "series of low concussions," he is decidedly of the new world (*TR* 45). The boy serves as an Adamic figure, a messiah not unlike Christ himself, who "must struggle on, so that he can be present at, or somehow contribute to, the eventual rebirth of the world" (Chabon 112). Indeed, the father and son's decade-long survival in the face of such brutal and unlikely odds is "providential," their tale "a messianic parable, with man and boy walking prophetically by rivers, in caves, on mountaintops and across the

wilderness in the spiritual spoor of biblical prophets" (Kennedy 11). In decidedly biblical language, the narrative early on alerts the reader to the child's holy nature: "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (*TR* 4), thinks the man, even as he often disbelieves in and curses God. After washing the dead man's brains from the boy's hair, the man muses, "All of this like some ancient anointing," and "Golden chalice, good to house a god" (63, 64). Even in dialogue the man suggests outright that the boy is holy, asking Ely, "What if I said that he's a god?" (145). Further, as the man is dying, he calls the child "the best guy" (235), a superlative that elevates the boy above simple "good guy" status and sets him apart from his father and any other decent human beings.

The boy's role as a hopeful Adamic or messianic figure is best understood in contrast with another Adamic character in McCarthy's fiction, the notorious Judge Holden of *Blood Meridian*. (19) Joshua J. Masters explores the judge as simultaneous trickster, ethnographer and Adam, identifying him as "a self-written figure" who "not only interprets the world and its history, but also creates that world through his ability to apply language, to name" (28, 36). The judge's efforts of creation, of course, are all in service of violence. He "is the supreme evil opposite of the good boy messiah" in *The Road* (Kennedy 11), and the styles of the two characters' dialogue set them in opposition to one another: the judge's highfalutin sermons stand in sharp contrast to the child's simplistic statements and questions. (20) When discoursing to Glanton's men, the judge likens war to a card game:

Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man's hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man's worth could there be? This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is

the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. (BM 249)

Here, as throughout *Blood Meridian*, the judge's long-winded, baroque sentiments are opaque; the judge conceals the true nature of his statements in linguistic circumlocutions that extend beyond the men's understanding. (21) "You're crazy Holden. Crazy at last," is all that one of Glanton's men can manage in response, and at this the judge just smiles (249). He "says things--terrible things--so beautifully that his own contradictions are likely to slide in one ear and out the other" (Ellis 164). The quintessential man of learning--the judge knows all languages, is versed in all disciplines--he makes the men his "disciples of a new faith" with impressive feats of language that they often fail to grasp (*BM* 130).

The Road's moment of supreme clarity regarding the child's true nature, by contrast, comes in two simple sentences. When the father tells the child, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything," the child responds, "Yes I am ... I am the one" (*TR* 218). This moment shines not simply for its transparency, but also for its singularity and the change it suggests: here, the boy unequivocally states who he is, whereas previously he has looked to his father for answers, asking whether they are the good guys. The certainty and clarity with which the boy for the first time puts his own words to himself contribute to the statement's decidedly messianic ring. This line is reminiscent both of John 14:6, where Jesus proclaims, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and of Matthew 16:15, where Jesus prods his disciples by asking, "But whom say ye that I am?" Unlike the judge, the god of war, the boy promises mercy and redemption. His proclamation follows the discovery of the thief who stole their food, shoes and blankets, when the father has said, "I'm going to leave you the way you left us," and divested the man of all clothing and property (*TR* 217). The child, distraught over this eye-for-an-eye mentality, begs his father to show the man mercy and forgives the unrepentant thief without a thought.

By naming himself "the one," the boy here, only a few days before his father's death, bears out the idea that he is, indeed, the one for whom the world is waiting. And already he has not only named himself, but also provided another character with the closest thing to a "real" name in *The Road*. Throughout the novel the child calls his father "Papa"; (22) this is the only word of its kind used as a form of address, a fact that underscores the essential nature of the father-son relationship that guides every moment of

the novel's action. (23) This relationship has survived--in fact, it enables survival after the world has come to such a terrible state--and "the strength of it helps raise the novel--despite considerable gore--above nihilistic horror" (Zipp 14). The choice of such an affectionate term, moreover, as opposed to a more formal word such as "Father," highlights the deep, intimate nature of the pair's relationship. When the man who finds the boy after the father's death asks, "Was that your father?" the boy's response is a confirmation, but also a correction that reaffirms the boy's ability to name that bond: "Yes. He was my papa" (*TR* 237). And the child's burgeoning ability to name--to say simply and directly what a thing is and, like Adam, to make it so--is made more powerful by his ability to read and write, (24) even in the absence of a culture that supports and nurtures these activities. Together, these abilities suggest that he can go forward, beyond the novel's end, to write the new story of the new world.

And it is in the ending of *The Road* that we see most fully the novel's departure from *Blood Meridian*. The latter work ends with the judge--with evil incarnate. Glanton's men have long since died in the enterprise of war, the judge has just killed the kid, and now only the judge remains: "He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (*BM* 335). (25) War and death, the everlasting dance, have presided over the whole novel, and in the end war and death--in the physical body of the judge--are victorious. His "impermeable, amoral logos" wins (Masters 25). But McCarthy uncharacteristically writes possibility into the ending of *The Road* by giving the child a fighting chance. Five pages before the story's close, the man, now wounded by an arrow, his lungs nearly failing, says his final words to the child: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (*TR* 236). In the night the man dies, leaving his son alone and starving on the road. And after three days, goodness--much as it does in the Gospels--does, in fact, arrive: the child is found by another traveler, the father of a young boy and girl. These new "good guys" (they don't eat people either) welcome the child among them, and in the next-to-last scene, the man's wife tells the boy "that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time," strengthening the Adamic connection and recalling Genesis. McCarthy emphasizes this link in a closing scene that tells how "Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains.... In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (241). The end and the beginning are inseparable in *The Road*. For it is the end of

the old world that signals the possibility of a new one, and the novel's own ending so clearly harkens back to a beginning, the beginning of time.

WHAT COMES AFTER, WHAT COMES AGAIN

We cannot traverse *The Road* without a startling awareness of its departure from McCarthy's previous style. Along with its odd approach to naming, the fractured narrative structure, proliferation of sentence fragments, and brief, repetitive dialogue differentiate the novel from the rest of his work. Doubtless, some critics will charge that in *The Road* McCarthy is not "McCarthy" enough: that, by alluding to some possibility beyond our present (and the novel's future) world, he sentimentalizes the horrible facts of our collective situation. These critics will precisely miss the point. It is one thing to render on the page a dreadful world so intensely that the reader cannot contest its veracity, and of this trade, McCarthy has long been master practitioner. But it is another thing altogether--and this, the far more difficult--to render a dreadful world while simultaneously conjuring an alternative with such clearness of vision that its truth is likewise unquestionable. This McCarthy does in *The Road* without flinching. Rather than merely reveling in the horror, as does *Blood Meridian*, *The Road* tries to move beyond it. While "*Blood Meridian* is not a salvation narrative" and "we can be rescued neither by faith nor by works nor by grace" (Shaviro 148), these very things do offer the possibility of redemption in *The Road*. The novel veers away from the "paradigm of a dead-end, paradigmless world" (Bell, "*Ambiguous Nihilism*" 32), away from the void, signaling a radically optimistic shift for one of contemporary fiction's most celebrated and prolific authors.

More broadly, *The Road* is an argument for a new kind of fiction, one that survives after the current paradigm of excess collapses, after the endlessly witty posturing exhausts itself with its own self-reflective neuroses. I am not arguing that the "postmodern" is dead. Those arguments have long been made, spoiled, and made again. And McCarthy's place in the postmodern canon (likewise, in that of the modernists) has been and will continue to be debated--by others. (26) What is evident, however, is McCarthy's refusal to accept the postmodern condition. Further, his answer is most assuredly not the often celebrated but seldom well-defined "posthumanism"--*The Road* is too optimistic and too biblical. However difficult to fathom on the novel's hellish earth, the main characters are the "good guys," and this they are because they hold fast to those rigidly human qualities that the novel posits

we are very much not "post": love, hope, courage. Just as these basic forms hold together what remains of this ruined fictional world, McCarthy searches for the essential elements of story--character, meaningful action, etc.--that hold narration together when artifice, self-consciousness and irony are burned away. Chabon is wrong in claiming that "the quest here feels random, empty at its core" (117). The "maps and mazes" at *The Road's* end point toward something essential at the center of the journey, and tellingly, the novel closes not with the intersection of arbitrary and nonsensical lines, but with the patterns on the backs of the trout, "maps of the world in its becoming," forms that suggest an inherent order and underlying purpose yet undiscovered (241).

In the brief epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, a man in the desert makes holes in the ground with a steel implement, then "enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there" (337). Citing this passage, Harold Bloom suggests, "The Judge never sleeps, and perhaps will never die, but a new Prometheus may be rising to go up against him" (xiii). In *The Road*, McCarthy has granted us this new Prometheus, a twenty-first-century good guy, Adam reinvented: the child is carrying the fire of hope and righteousness from the old story toward the new one. The father gives his son language, and after the father's death, the son goes on to seek that still elusive New Jerusalem that waits somewhere beyond the pages of the novel. Decidedly, *The Road* is not a tabula rasa, not a re-imagining from scratch; it takes what remains after the world has been destroyed and goes forward from there in search of what is next. And what we have in the novel's style is the post-apocalyptic language of a simultaneously new and age-old work: a means of looking forward, to after, by seeking the basic forms again. The paradoxical achievement of McCarthy's novel is that it accepts the disjunction between where the world/fiction has been and where it is going, and in this moment of possibility--after the old and before the new--reconciles barbarous destruction with eloquent hope.

Source: Kunsza, Ashley. "'Maps of the world in its becoming': post-apocalyptic naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.1 (2009): 57+. Literature Resource Center.

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions Source:

<http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/road1.asp>

1. Cormac McCarthy has an unmistakable prose style. What do you see as the most distinctive features of that style? How is the writing in *The Road* in some ways more like poetry than narrative prose?

2. Why do you think McCarthy has chosen not to give his characters names? How do the generic labels of "the man" and "the boy" affect the way in which readers relate to them?

3. How is McCarthy able to make the postapocalyptic world of *The Road* seem so real and utterly terrifying? Which descriptive passages are especially vivid and visceral in their depiction of this blasted landscape? What do you find to be the most horrifying features of this world and the survivors who inhabit it?

4. McCarthy doesn't make explicit what kind of catastrophe has ruined the earth and destroyed human civilization, but what might be suggested by the many descriptions of a scorched landscape covered in ash? What is implied by the father's statement that "On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world" [p. 32]?

5. As the father is dying, he tells his son he must go on in order to "carry the fire." When the boy asks if the fire is real, the father says, "It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" [p. 279]. What is this fire? Why is it so crucial that they not let it die?

6. McCarthy envisions a postapocalyptic world in which "murder was everywhere upon the land" and the earth would soon be "largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" [p. 181]. How difficult or easy is it to imagine McCarthy's nightmare vision actually happening? Do you think people would likely behave as they do in the novel, under the same circumstances? Does it now seem that human civilization is headed toward such an end?

7. The man and the boy think of themselves as the "good guys." In what ways are they like and unlike the "bad guys" they encounter? What do you think McCarthy is suggesting in the scenes in which the boy begs his father to be merciful to the strangers they encounter on the road? How is the boy able to retain his compassion--to be, as one reviewer put it, "compassion

incarnate"?

8. The sardonic blind man named Ely who the man and boy encounter on the road tells the father that "There is no God and we are his prophets" [p. 170]. What does he mean by this? Why does the father say about his son, later in the same conversation, "What if I said that he's a god?" [p. 172] Are we meant to see the son as a savior?

9. *The Road* takes the form of a classic journey story, a form that dates back to Homer's *Odyssey*. To what destination are the man and the boy journeying? In what sense are they "pilgrims"? What, if any, is the symbolic significance of their journey?

10. McCarthy's work often dramatizes the opposition between good and evil, with evil sometimes emerging triumphant. What does *The Road* ultimately suggest about good and evil? Which force seems to have greater power in the novel?

11. What makes the relationship between the boy and his father so powerful and poignant? What do they feel for each other? How do they maintain their affection for and faith in each other in such brutal conditions?

12. Why do you think McCarthy ends the novel with the image of trout in mountain streams before the end of the world: "In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" [p. 287]. What is surprising about this ending? Does it provide closure, or does it prompt a rethinking of all that has come before? What does it suggest about what lies ahead?

Multimedia

'The Road' Travels A Desolate American Future (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6158326>

A discussion of the novel on NPR.

The Road (Movie)

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1363540>

(Call number: DVD Drama Road)

A father and his son are two of the last remaining people on earth after an unexplained tragedy has destroyed most of life. As the two head south,

they are faced with many trials and tribulations along the way. An intense bond between the father and son is formed as together they strive to not only survive, but to retain humanity as they help the people they encounter along the way.

Further Reading

Blood Meridian by Cormac McCarthy

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1045894>

(Call number: Fiction McCarthy)

An epic novel of the violence and depravity that attended America's westward expansion, *Blood Meridian* brilliantly subverts the conventions of the Western novel and the mythology of the "wild west." Based on historical events that took place on the Texas-Mexico border in the 1850s, it traces the fortunes of the Kid, a fourteen-year-old Tennessean who stumbles into the nightmarish world where Indians are being murdered and the market for their scalps is thriving.

No Country For Old Men by Cormac McCarthy

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1241237>

(Call number: Fiction McCarthy)

In *No Country for Old Men*, Cormac McCarthy simultaneously strips down the American crime novel and broadens its concerns to encompass themes as ancient as the Bible and as bloodily contemporary as this morning's headlines.

Nuclear armament by Debra A. Miller

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1390061>

(call number: 355.825 Mi)

Do nuclear weapons arsenals pose a serious national security threat? -- Is there a significant threat of nuclear terrorism? -- Are ballistic missile defense systems necessary? -- Is the US response to the nuclear weapons threat adequate?

Author's official website

<http://www.cormacmccarthy.com/>

Information, news, and resources.

Read-Alikes

The Pesthouse by Jim Crace

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1283698>

(Call number: Fiction Crace)

In *The Pesthouse* Crace imagines an America of the future where a man and a woman trek across a devastated and dangerous landscape, finding strength in each other and an unexpected love. Once the safest, most prosperous place on earth, the United States is now a lawless, scantily populated wasteland. The machines have stopped. The government has collapsed. Farmlands lie fallow and the soil is contaminated by toxins. Across the country, families have packed up their belongings to travel eastward toward the one hope left: passage on a ship to Europe.

Alas, Babylon by Pat Frank

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1025494>

(Call number: Fiction Frank)

The classic apocalyptic novel that stunned the nation with its vivid portrayal of a small town's survival after nuclear holocaust devastates the country.

Mara and Dann by Doris Lessing

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1146083>

(Call number: Fiction Lessing)

Thousands Of Years In The future, seven-year-old Mara and her brother, Dann, are abducted in the middle of the night. Raised among hostile "Rock people", they eventually join the great migration north, away from the drought that is turning the land to desert. Trekking across a barren countryside, Mara and Dann move through a diversity of peoples and places and survive many hazardous adventures. Mara's mind is as restless as her feet, as she hungers for answers: Who are my parents? Where do I come from? What will we find up north? With an unquenchable thirst to learn and a compassionate nature that survives despite all odds, Mara is one of Lessing's greatest heroines.

Life of Pi by Yann Martel

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1191673>

(Call number: Fiction Martel)

The son of a zookeeper, he has an encyclopedic knowledge of animal behavior, a fervent love of stories, and practices not only his native Hinduism, but also Christianity and Islam. When Pi is sixteen, his family emigrates from India to North America aboard a Japanese cargo ship, along with their zoo animals bound for new homes. The ship sinks. Pi finds

himself alone in a lifeboat, his only companions a hyena, an orangutan, a wounded zebra, and Richard Parker, a 450-pound Bengal tiger. Soon the tiger has dispatched all but Pi, whose fear, knowledge, and cunning allow him to coexist with Richard Parker for 227 days lost at sea. When they finally reach the coast of Mexico, Richard Parker flees to the jungle, never to be seen again. The Japanese authorities who interrogate Pi refuse to believe his story and press him to tell them "the truth."

A Canticle for Leibowitz by Walter M. Miller, Jr.

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1047698>

(Call number: Science Fiction Miller)

Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is a true landmark of twentieth-century literature -- a chilling and still-provocative look at a post-apocalyptic future. In a nightmarish ruined world slowly awakening to the light after sleeping in darkness, the infant rediscoveries of science are secretly nourished by cloistered monks dedicated to the study and preservation of the relics and writings of the blessed Saint Isaac Leibowitz. From here the story spans centuries of ignorance, violence, and barbarism, viewing through a sharp, satirical eye the relentless progression of a human race damned by its inherent humanness to recelerbrate its grand foibles and repeat its grievous mistakes

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Extras!

If members of the reading group were given warning that society was ending, what would be the first things they would do (after checking on friends and family)?

