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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

The Road Through Hell, Paved With Desperation

By [JANET MASLIN](#)

In “The Road” a boy and his father lurch across the cold, wretched, wet, corpse-strewn, ashen landscape of a post-apocalyptic world. The imagery is brutal even by Cormac McCarthy’s high standards for despair. This parable is also trenchant and terrifying, written with stripped-down urgency and fueled by the force of a universal nightmare. “The Road” would be pure misery if not for its stunning, savage beauty.

This is an exquisitely bleak incantation — pure poetic brimstone. Mr. McCarthy has summoned his fiercest visions to invoke the devastation. He gives voice to the unspeakable in a terse cautionary tale that is too potent to be numbing, despite the stupefying ravages it describes. Mr. McCarthy brings an almost biblical fury as he bears witness to sights man was never meant to see.

“There is no prophet in the earth’s long chronicle who is not honored here today,” the father says, trying to make his son understand why they inhabit a gray moonscape. “Whatever form you spoke of you were right.” Thus “The Road” keeps pace with the most enterprising doomsayers as death and desperation manifest themselves on every page. And in a perverse miracle it yields one last calamity when it seems that things cannot possibly get worse.

Yet as the boy and man wander, encountering remnants of the lost world and providing the reader with more and more clues about what destroyed it, this narrative is also illuminated by extraordinary tenderness. “He knew only that the child was his warrant,” it says of the father and his mission. “He said: if he is not the word of God God never spoke.”

The father’s loving efforts to shepherd his son are made that much more wrenching by the unavailability of food, shelter, safety, companionship or hope in most places where they scavenge to subsist.

Keeping memory alive is difficult, since the past grows increasingly remote. It is as if these lonely characters are experiencing “the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world.” The past has become like a place inhabited by the newly blind, all of it slowly slipping away. As for looking toward the future, “there is no later,” the book says starkly. “This is later.”

The ruined setting of “The Road” is strewn with terrible, revealing artifacts. There are old newspapers. (“The curious news. The quaint concerns.”) There is one lone bottle of Coca-Cola, still absurdly fizzy when all else is dust. There are charred corpses frozen in their final postures, like the long-dead man who sits on a porch like “a straw man set out to announce some holiday.” Sometimes these prompt the father to recall “a dull rose glow in the windowglass” at 1:17 in the morning, the moment when the clocks stopped forever.

“The Road” is not concerned with explaining what caused this cataclysm. It is more abstract than that.

Instead it becomes a relentless cautionary tale with “Lord of the Flies”-style symbolic impact, marked by a dark fascination with the primal laws of survival. Much of its impact comes from the absolute lawlessness of its backdrop as it undermines the father’s only remaining certitude: that he must keep his boy alive no matter what danger befalls them.

As they move down the metaphorical road of the title, father and son encounter all manner of perils. The weather is bitter, the landscape colorless, the threat of starvation imminent. There is also the occasional interloper or ominous relic, since the road is not entirely abandoned.

The sight of a scorched, shuffling man prompts the boy to ask what is wrong with him; the father simply replies that the man has been struck by lightning. Spear-carrying marchers on the road offer other hints about recent history. Groups of people are stowed away in hidden places as if they were other people’s food supply. In a book filled with virtual zombies and fixated on the living dead, it turns out that they are.

Since the cataclysm has presumably incinerated all dictionaries, Mr. McCarthy’s affinity for words like rachitic and crozzled has as much visceral, atmospheric power as precise meaning. His use of language is as exultant as his imaginings are hellish, a hint that “The Road” will ultimately be more radiant than it is punishing. Somehow Mr. McCarthy is able to hold firm to his pessimism while allowing the reader to see beyond it. This is art that both frightens and inspires.

Although “The Road” is entirely unsentimental, it gives father and son a memory to keep them moving, even if it is the memory of how and why the boy’s mother chose to die. She was pregnant when the world exploded, and the boy was born a few days after she and the man “watched distant cities burn.”

Ultimately she gave up and took a bullet: “She was gone and the coldness of it was her final gift.” In a book whose events are isolated and carefully chosen, the appearance of a flare gun late in the story is filled with echoes of her final decision.

The mother’s suicide is one more reason for astonishment at Mr. McCarthy’s final gesture here: an embrace of faith in the face of no hope whatsoever. Coming as it does after such intense moments of despondency, this faith is even more of a leap than it might be in a more forgiving story. It adds immeasurably to the staying power of a book that is simple yet mysterious, simultaneously cryptic and crystal clear.

“The Road” offers nothing in the way of escape or comfort. But its fearless wisdom is more indelible than reassurance could ever be.

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