

# Two novels about America's future: writers need a new perspective

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*The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, New York: Random House, 2006, 287 pp.

*The Pesthouse* by Jim Crace, New York: Doubleday, 2007, 255 pp.

These two recent novels, different in quality, attitude and impact, both depict a bleak and miserable fictional future for the United States in which human relations have become thoroughly degraded.

The imagining of the future has been a critical component of modern fiction. Generally speaking, nineteenth century novels looked to the future with hope and anticipation. The explosive growth of the productive forces, including astonishing scientific and technical advances, fueled such sentiments. The emergence of a mass socialist culture in Europe, and to some extent the US, played no small part in that. In any event, society seemed to have a promising future, even if its social relations had to be drastically rearranged.

William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890) and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), for example, looked forward to a society free of exploitation in which human beings lived in solidarity with each other and shared the wealth they produced.

These were socially critical works. They were intended to expose the iniquities of the capitalist system and posit something better, explicitly—through reform (*Looking Backward*) or revolution (*News from Nowhere*)—or implicitly—(e.g., William Dean Howells's searing 1894 critique of American society, *A Traveler from Altruria*) [1].

The twentieth century found these themes more problematic. The first attempts to fashion an international socialist society encountered difficulties, suffered setbacks and ushered in an enormously confusing period.

Speculative fiction could not escape the impact of these difficulties, at the center of which was the degeneration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a dictatorial bureaucracy that claimed to represent 'communism.' Such work in the middle of the twentieth century and beyond often told readers that social change was futile and that social evolution (or revolution) would lead in a totalitarian direction. One thinks of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949), although the latter had many legitimate things to say about Stalinism.

After the experience of the war and the Holocaust, American authors in particular produced many bleak and uninspiring images of the future, in works ranging from Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) to Kurt Vonnegut's novels.

In the last 25 years or so, a new generation has anticipated the future. The science fiction genre of cyberpunk, for example, has posited a United States (or former United States) openly controlled by all-powerful corporations and invested with a high degree of computer technology. The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood has written two dystopias. The first, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), was artistically successful and to some extent socially subversive. A later work, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), had much less to say on both counts.

However, dystopian writing for many years did not completely abandon the socially critical element that was present in the earlier, positive views of the future. It often served to warn of dangers ahead, and a thematic staple was often organized opposition to the conditions of existence. Still, that is not saying all that much. The hobbled future, with a passive population and the fruitless revolt of a few, reflected a narrow and impoverished view of social development.

The two recent works under review have taken matters a step further: they have almost completely dispensed with opposition to the horrors of the future, and, in different ways, wallow in hopelessness that seems at odds with life today.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize and has achieved a certain degree of popularity after television talk-show host Oprah Winfrey selected the work for her book club.

*The Road* takes place in the near future, probably in the southeastern United States. A man and his young son (they are never named) travel across a lifeless world ten years after a nuclear holocaust.

Everything is covered in ash. Forests are scorched, and there is no animal life aside from humans. The man and boy scrounge for canned goods and drops of gasoline. They hide from gangs of marauders to avoid being raped, killed and eaten.

The book is filled with scenes of hunger, filth, blood and sorrow. Scarcely any interactions with other human beings are free from terror. In the cellar of one house, humans are slowly being eaten limb by limb. In a long scene, the father holds a gun on a man before he kills the latter in front of his son. Even the flashbacks to the man's past are grim. In one, his wife (the boy's mother) argues for suicide and against the cruelty of his asking her to live. She kills herself.

There are no memories of the political crisis that must have led up to the nuclear war. Nor is there a notion of what the man might have done for a living, what friends he had (although he tells the boy he once had many friends), how he spent his time and if he enjoyed life. The book is so heavy-handed in this respect as to be implausible. As far as possible, McCarthy has expunged history and society from this future.

One does feel the father's strong survival instinct. He stays alive because he loves his son. McCarthy, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, attributed this partly to his own recent entry into fatherhood.

Critics have focused on this aspect of the novel, but it really seems to miss the point. What about the larger issues? Even under such horrific circumstances, would no echo of a planet of billions of people and a culture of thousands of years remain?

McCarthy once notes that the boy and the man have books. However, he says little about what they contain, or how they might have affected the two. *The Road* lacks—in fact, it deliberately excises—the full and rich context of humanity, even in disaster.

This sort of family-oriented individualism is popular among right-wing survivalists: outside the emotional fortress of the family unit, society is a suspect and hostile entity. The father tells the son that they are the 'good

guys.’ This is something one might reassure a child with, but McCarthy is also saying it to the readers, and it does nothing to elevate the moral stature of the novel; it only helps create a contrived and uninteresting ending.

McCarthy has a low estimation of human culture in the present and in the past, as he has frequently shown in other works. Much of his writing is bloody-minded and most of the time, he creates worlds where fear is pervasive.

*Blood Meridian* (1984) is widely considered by critics to be McCarthy’s best work, and by many, a masterpiece of American literature. It is the author’s version of the history of the Glanton gang, which, in the years after the Mexican-American War, rode across northern Mexico hiring itself out as a mercenary band and committing atrocities, usually against the native peoples of the region.

McCarthy has recreated this genocide without any attention to the contradictory and inevitably human emotions of the Glanton mercenaries. There are few fully fleshed-out human beings in the work, only victims, perpetrators and colorless bystanders.

The westward expansion of the United States, the tensions that would lead to a Civil War involving democratic principles a few years later—in other words, the complexities of history—do not figure into *Blood Meridian*.

There are times in this work when his descriptions have a kind of archaic beauty and his talent can affect us at tragic moments. Sometimes the reader becomes angry at various inhumanities, but overall he or she grows inured to the loss of life amid the endless sadism.

In *The Road*, it seems that McCarthy has projected, rather pointlessly, this shadow of overwhelming evil, mystical and ahistorical, into the future.

Jim Crace is a British author, younger than McCarthy, and has written eight novels. His best known, *Being Dead* (1998), a somewhat morbid look at the lives of two murdered zoologists, won the US National Book Critics Circle Award in 2000.

There is certainly a compassionate touch to this work, which describes the scientists’ lives from their student days until their marriages, the oddities of their personalities, their secrets and their hopes.

Nevertheless, Crace adds a good deal of unnecessary baggage to the novel. It returns regularly to the objective state of decay of the two bodies. Why is this necessary? Although the novel is intelligently done, one wonders more than once why it was written.

One asks the same question about Crace’s dystopia, *The Pesthouse*.

Several generations in the future, America is recovering from some sort of catastrophe. Given the ruined highways and shells of machines and cities, it seems likely that a nuclear war has been fought.

Society has been pushed back to a medieval level. People are illiterate farmers. Life is hard, and there is an emigration to the East Coast where people hope to board boats bound for a promised land, presumably in Europe.

We encounter a sturdy young man, Franklin, who meets an attractive young woman, Margaret. She has had a disease and been left by her family to recover or to die in a hut known as the pesthouse. Early in the novel, her community is destroyed. After Franklin has helped her back to health, the two of them set off east.

The journey is arduous. The people they encounter are sometimes robbers and sometimes good companions. There is a general sense of want and poverty. People have few possessions and these are always in danger of being stolen.

There is constant loss. Franklin is captured and enslaved. Margaret finds safety in a religious commune run by descendants of the Baptists who eschew metal, considered the root of all evil. The general atmosphere is one of superstition and ignorance.

Franklin escapes from his captors, reunites with Margaret, and the two

of them continue on to the coast where men functioning at a slightly higher technological level offer passage by boat only to a few. Franklin and Margaret return to the pesthouse and start a new life.

Franklin and Margaret are not contradictory or complex characters. For no apparent reason, their love affair takes the entire novel to bloom. At the end of the book the two tell themselves they can finally be free, but freedom had not been a goal of theirs nor did anyone else seem to be looking for it.

In fact, the reasons for the eastward migration in the book—aside from the fact that it is a reversal of the historical expansion of the United States—are unclear.

This lack of motivation co-exists with frequently awkward or stereotyped images: “Flapping his arms like a girl,” for example, does not tell us much.

Nor do Franklin and Margaret really seem to come from a society with a class structure, customs or a culture. Crace does describe an “old American” custom of respecting one’s elders (?), but it seems to come out of nowhere and it only highlights his general failure at creating a plausible world in which these two people have grown up.

In addition, what does this world have to do with the America that has been destroyed by war generations earlier? This hidden history that must be known to the author does not seem particularly worked out.

How would American society appear a century after a devastating catastrophe? This is a complex and rich problem for the novelist, but Crace does not attempt a plausible or serious answer in *The Pesthouse*.

Yet, that is not even the main question. If Crace, like McCarthy, were more attentive as to the laws of social development, more attuned to the moods of the population, would he forecast so light-mindedly nuclear war, savagery and ignorance in the coming decade or century?

The problems concerning the future in *The Pesthouse* and *The Road* stem from the difficulties many writers have in making sense of the contemporary world. It is hardly a secret that the image of the future in fiction, utopian or dystopian, reflects the author’s view of contemporary hopes and fears. Whose fears are these? What section of the population is cowering in a corner expecting a return to the Middle Ages or worse?

The two books seem at aesthetic loose ends. Their characters’ motivations are largely undeveloped or banal. “We’re carrying the flame,” the father tells the son in *The Road*, and, “We go. We carry on. That’s what we have to do,” Margaret says at a moment of crisis in *The Pesthouse*. There is something artistically lazy here.

In these works, we witness a cultural phenomenon: dystopia, the literary form born of discouragement in great social causes, has reached a nadir of unreality, a sort of aesthetic breakdown. Crace and McCarthy have the right to be pessimistic, or to posture along those lines. However, we have the right to call their works out-of-step, tiresome and empty, and draw the conclusion that writers need a new perspective.

[1] The reader can find the texts of these three novels at Project Gutenberg:

A Traveler from Altruria

Looking Backward

News from Nowhere



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