



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

No Country for Old Men

Laconic is the word. Say little but say it well. Write in sentences sand-blasted by time, words sucked to stone before they're spoken. Such is the prose of Cormac McCarthy, a beauteous thing winnowed down over a long career from the supple effusion of *All the Pretty Horses* to the stripped-bone clarity of *The Road*. It's the way people say only what they have to in the places where his books are set, the way images are cut in simple strokes, each word axing clean the apt description. *No Country for Old Men* unfolds in the Texas borderlands of the 1980s, near the Rio Grande. It's a quasi-thriller laced with regret for the way things are going, for how plain-speaking integrity is being destroyed by the encroaching violence of the drugs trade.

Joel and Ethan Coen, too, are on neighbourly terms with the laconic. Given to deadpan avoidance of the serious in interviews, they produce screenplays that show a po-faced passion for pith. Characters in *Blood Simple* (1983), *Fargo* (1995) and *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000), to take just three of their films, practise a verbal exactitude that is an essential part of the texture we expect from a Coen brothers movie.

The brothers are acknowledged masters of the punchline-plentiful script, but a weak run of films suggested they might have lost a level of care or tried to tailor their work too much to that elusive wider audience. *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) was a patchy and charmless period-piece enigma; the romantic comedy *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003) seemed to lack self-belief, the remake of the Ealing comedy *The Ladykillers* (2004) was a huge misjudgement. Yet if one were looking for the ideal artists to translate the already cinematic prose of *No Country for Old Men* as directly as possible into great cinema, the Coens would be the obvious choice.

The Texas/Mexico borderlands have the harsh and harrowing beauty of a wilderness. You feel the wind between McCarthy's words but you fear the cinematic image might diminish the ethereal to the stock gesture of a patrol car on a dirt road pulling someone over. Right from the start, however, Roger Deakins' ravishing photography seeks the immanent in the landscape as the voice of an unidentified sheriff tells us his fears for the future. And in the opening minutes, after the first killing by soft-shoe supervillain Chigurh (Javier Bardem), a strangulation he relishes with demonic delight, Deakins is shooting an expanse of semi-desert scrub occupied by a flock of deer through the crosshairs of a telescopic gunsight. As the image shimmers with heat haze and blurs with sight adjustments, you already feel assured that this is the happiest marriage of novel to filmmakers for years.

This rifle belongs to Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin), whose first shot wounds a deer. He follows the blood trail, but instead of finding his kill he arrives at the slaughter ground of a drugs-gang shootout. Bullet riddled trucks are circled round and corpses are strewn everywhere. Llewelyn could just move on, and we feel his anxiety about the decision, but something makes him check the scene. One wounded Mexican is still alive in a truck, pleading for water, but Llewelyn leaves him there, taking his machine pistol. And then the hunter finds the story's real game; a briefcase full of money (\$2.4 million). He removes it on impulse and hides it under the trailer home he shares with his wife Carla Jean

(Kelly Macdonald). That night he remembers the Mexican he left alive, and returns to the scene with water.

But it's not the same anymore. Some things have altered. Soon he's being pursued through the scrub by an attack dog and a truck with men firing automatic weapons from behind a bank of headlights. It transpires later that Chigurh, too, will be on his trail, while Sheriff Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) – whose voice we hear at the opening – will also slowly find his way to him. If you were to consider Chigurh as the bad guy, Bell as the good guy, and Llewelyn as the one caught between darkness and light, you wouldn't be far from the truth.

What's most remarkable about the plot that unfolds from here is how much it resembles and yet shies away from the 'thriller' tag. Fateful events barrel along with the requisite momentum and there are many brilliant sequences of protracted high tension such as the moment when Llewelyn senses that Chigurh, the professional psychopath, is just outside his hotel-room door. There are as many picaresque surprises as you would find in the most oddball of the Coens' films, several of them revolving around fate hanging on the toss of a coin. Yet nearly all of this is Cormac McCarthy's original material; the Coens have resisted manfully the temptation to tinker. Even the sharp one-liners, which those who haven't read the book will assume are the Coens' own, are mostly McCarthy-minted.

Maybe the Coens are even guilty of being too faithful. For there are endings here – ones I won't reveal – that are self-consciously literary and therefore hard to cinematise. These may leave those most pleased to find themselves once again with the Coens in pure genre territory feeling a little short-changed. There's no supercharged cathartic climax – though for me what happens instead keeps the film tied to the heart of the novel, with its desire to transcend the quotidian for a god's-eye overview. This may be one reason why the film has the quality of the best US cinema of the 1970s.

Certainly the cast seem as if they've been steeped for years in McCarthyite atmosphere. Jones might have ducked another Texan law enforcement role but could hardly have resisted this; Brolin is the most natural leading man for this sort of thing that Hollywood has unearthed in a long time; Bardem is creepy and implacable as a nemesis inured to reason; Macdonald is so plausibly Texan as to seem separated at birth from a Scots twin.

Those of us who have long thought of the Coens as superb technicians, comedians and offbeat entertainers rather than makers of probing works will have to concede a breakthrough here. With *No Country for Old Men* they've stopped being smirking nerds – there's nothing here that smacks of 'look at what we just did'. Rather, this is a mature film about the US hinterland that can be put beside the likes of John Ford and Clint Eastwood.

Nick James, *Sight & Sound*, July 2007

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

Directed by: Joel Coen, Ethan Coen
© Miramax Film Corp.
©/Presented by: Paramount Vantage
Production Companies: Scott Rudin Productions, Mike Zoss Productions
Presented by: Miramax Films
Executive Producers: Robert Graf, Mark Roybal
Produced by: Scott Rudin, Ethan Coen, Joel Coen
Associate Producer: David Diliberto
Production Supervisor: Karen Ruth Getchell
Production Accountant: Cheryl Kurk
Production Co-ordinator: Rachael Lin Gallagher
Production Co-ordinator (Mexico Unit): Gabriel Perez
Production Manager (Mexico Unit): Omar Veytia
Unit Production Manager: Robert Graf
Location Manager: Michael Dellheim
Post-production Co-ordinator: Catherine Farrell
2nd Unit Director: Jery Hewitt
1st Assistant Director: Betsy Magruder
2nd Assistant Director: Bac DeLorme
2nd 2nd Assistant Director: Jai James
2nd Unit 1st Assistant Director: Donald Murphy
2nd Unit 2nd Assistant Director: Pete Dress
2nd Unit 2nd 2nd Assistant Director: Taylor Phillips
Script Supervisor: Thomas Johnston
2nd Unit Script Supervisor: Mamie Mitchell
Casting: Ellen Chenoweth
Location Casting: Jo Edna Boldin
Additional Casting: Tracy Kilpatrick
Voice Casting: Barbara Harris
Written for the Screen by: Joel Coen, Ethan Coen
Based on the novel by: Cormac McCarthy
Director of Photography: Roger Deakins
2nd Unit Director of Photography: Paul Elliott
Camera Operator: Roger Deakins
2nd Unit Camera Operator: Andy Graham
1st Assistant Camera A: Andy Harris
1st Assistant Camera B: Joshua Blakeslee
2nd Unit 1st Assistant Camera: Thomas Bango, Chris Mack
2nd Assistant Camera A: Liza 'Wintapants' Bambenek
Chief Lighting Technician: Chris Napolitano
2nd Unit Chief Lighting Technician: Scott Kidner
Video Assist: 'Rogers' W. Basquette
Still Photographer: Richard Foreman Jr
Visual Effects by: Luma
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Peter Chesney
Graphic Designer: Gregory L. Hill
Edited by: Roderick Jaynes [i.e., Joel Coen, Ethan Coen]
Associate Film Editor: Neil A. Stelzner
Assistant Editor: Katharine McQuerrey
Production Designer: Jess Gonchor
Visual Consultant: J. Todd Anderson
Art Director: John P. Goldsmith
Set Decorator: Nancy Haigh
Property Master: Keith Walters
Construction Co-ordinator: Christopher Windisch
Costume Designer: Mary Zophres
Costume Supervisor: Lori DeLapp
Assistant Costume Designer: Jenny Eagan
Key Costumer: Aleah Ames
Make-up Department Head: Jean A. Black
Special Make-up Effects: Christien Tinsley
Hair Department Head: Paul LeBlanc
Titles Designed by: Big Film Design
Digital Intermediate: EFilm

Digital Colour Timer: Mike Hatser
Negative Cutter: Executive Cutting
Opticals: Plethorafx
Music: Carter Burwell
Orchestra Contractor: Sandy Park
Music Executive: Linda Cohen
Music Editor: Todd Kasow
Music Recorded/Mixed by: Michael Farrow
Sound Designer: Craig Berkey
Sound Mixer: Peter Kurland
Boom Operators: Randy Johnson, Joe Brennan
Re-recording Mixers: Skip Lievsay, Craig Berkey, Greg Orloff
Supervising Sound Editor: Skip Lievsay
Dialogue Editor: Byron Wilson
Stunt Co-ordinator: Jery Hewitt
Animal Trainers: Cheryl Shawver, Janine L. Aines, Melinda Eichberg, Khary Lee, Tom Roach, Victoria M. Vopni
Wrangler: Mark Brooks
Unit Publicist: Louise A. Spencer

Cast

Tommy Lee Jones (*Sheriff Ed Tom Bell*)
Javier Bardem (*Anton Chigurh*)
Josh Brolin (*Llewelyn Moss*)
Woody Harrelson (*Carson Wells*)
Kelly Macdonald (*Carla Jean Moss*)
Garret Dillahunt (*Wendell*)
Tess Harper (*Loretta Bell*)
Barry Corbin (*Ellis*)
Stephen Root (*man who hires Wells*)
Rodger Boyce (*El Paso sheriff*)
Beth Grant (*Carla Jean's mother*)
Ana Reeder (*poolside woman*)
Kit Gwin (*Sheriff Bell's secretary*)
Zach Hopkins (*strangled deputy*)
Chip Love (*man in Ford*)
Eduardo Antonio Garcia (*'agua' man*)
Gene Jones (*gas station proprietor*)
Myk Watford, Boots Southerland (*'managerial' victims*)
Kathy Lamkin (*Desert Aire manager*)
Johnnie Hector (*cabbie at bus station*)
Margaret Bowman (*Del Rio motel clerk*)
Thomas Kopache (*boot salesman*)
Jason Douglas (*cabbie at motel*)
Doris Hargrave (*waitress*)
Rutherford Cravens (*gun store clerk*)
Matthew Posey (*sporting goods clerk*)
George Adelo (*Mexican in bathtub*)
Mathew Greer (*hitchhiking driver*)
Trent Moore (*nervous accountant*)
Marc Miles (*Hotel Eagle clerk*)
Luce Rains (*pickup driver*)
Philip Bentham, Eric Reeves, Josh Meyer (*border bridge youths*)
Chris Warner (*flatbed driver*)
Brandon Smith (*INS Official*)
H. Roland Uribe (*well dressed Mexican*)
Richard Jackson (*chicken farmer*)
Josh Blaylock, Caleb Jones (*boys on bike*)
Dorsey Ray (*Odessa cabbie*)
Angel H. Alvarado Jr, David A. Gomez, Milton Hernandez, John Mancha (*Norteño bands*)

USA 2007©

122 mins

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