

 **Mark Tardi**

University of Lodz

“All of history a rehearsal for its own extinction”: A Review of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Passenger* (Knopf, 2022)

It has been a decade and a half since Cormac McCarthy last published a novel—his highly acclaimed *The Road*—so it came as something of a surprise when he published not one but two new novels in the autumn of 2022: first, *The Passenger* and one month later, *Stella Maris*. Together, the two books form a sort of duet of incestuous devastation, although each can stand on its own. The protagonist of *The Passenger* is one Bobby Western, originally from Wartburg, Tennessee, and now working as a salvage diver and living in New Orleans in 1980—except that Western also studied advanced mathematics and physics, raced Formula 2 in Europe, and is the son of one of the physicists who worked on the Manhattan Project. So it is fair to say that he has a complicated history and some attendant baggage.

Western and his friend Oiler are called to dive a plane crash at night, ostensibly a search and rescue for survivors, but the two men harbor no illusions. Once Oiler—the character’s name perhaps an echo of the character from Stephen Crane’s “Open Boat”—opens the hatch, they find nine passengers inside, “[t]heir mouths open, eyes devoid of speculation” (19). Western and Oiler quickly take inventory of what else is inside the plane, and perhaps more importantly, what is missing: the flight recorder. Once topside, they gather their gear and discuss various details that do not add up: how the plane seems almost perfectly intact; that the passengers had been dead for a few days already; the sense that somebody had been there before them and the unnerving fact that the flight recorder had clearly been removed. Where Oiler and Western differ perhaps is that Oiler (rightly) intuits that nothing good will come of any further inquiry into the plane or what transpired, while Western seems haunted by a desire to puzzle it out.

Afterwards, Western strolls down Bourbon Street, runs into old friends—“Familiars out of another life. How many tales begin just so?” (24)—and takes a seat amidst the banter and booze where Long John

Sheddan is holding court. The atmosphere is reminiscent of some scenes in McCarthy's *Suttree*, and Sheddan—a sort of snobbish miscreant who refers to Western only as “Squire”—delivers his opinions on various subjects as humorous drunken proverbs: “The French favor white [wines] that can double as window cleaner” (137) or “Bloated oafs dine in gym clothes. . . . I've seen entire families here that can best be described as hallucinations” (136). Sheddan rhapsodizes about Western's past—his father's link to the atomic bomb as well as his love for his dead sister—and he calls Western a “chickenfucker,” an unsubtle dig at his roots in Tennessee hill country. Such literary gestures circle back to some of McCarthy's earliest books such as *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, set in harsh Tennessee environs seeped in aberrant behaviors and peculiar forms of resiliency. In fact, much about *The Passenger* feels familiar, from the setting of the American South in the 1980s to the barroom banter to McCarthy's signature limited punctuation. In some respects, Bobby Western could even be seen as the braiding of Llewelyn Moss and Sheriff Ed Tom Bell from *No Country For Old Men*, a world-weary man with dangers closing in around him who tries to outsmart the inevitable. But *The Passenger* is familiarity renovated by the interiority of its characters, like visiting a childhood home decades after it has been redecorated and lived in by others, and unlike many of McCarthy's characters in previous novels, we get a more layered look into the emotional and intellectual lives of both Bobby and Alicia.

Those who have read any number of McCarthy's previous books have come to expect that some scenes or events will be profoundly disturbing, although such episodes are often contained after the plots and characters have been firmly established. In this respect, *The Passenger* is different too: a desolate sonata that opens with the harrowing suicide of Alicia, Western's brilliant and beautiful sister. The book subsequently toggles between Western's current circumstances and flashback interludes of Alicia's troubling hallucinations, most notably perhaps the recurring visits from a figure who would not be out of place in a David Lynch film, the Thalidomide Kid (or “the Kid” for short). And while the name the Kid might remind readers of McCarthy's masterpiece *Blood Meridian*, this Kid is cut from a different cloth: the wise-cracking, rhyming leader of a vaudeville troupe who “looked like he'd been brought into the world with icetongs” (6) and whose appendages “[w]erent really hands. Just flippers” (5).

Not long after diving the plane crash, murky governmental types appear outside of Western's apartment to question him about the plane. It is clear that they have already been inside his place and it is there that we learn that a passenger from the plane is missing. And although Western assumes a kind of studied nonchalance, goes about his normal routines of work

and meetings with friends, from that point onward his situation becomes increasingly tenuous. That said, even amidst mounting pressures, Western's interiority is developed not only through his own introspection—of which there is plenty—but through the variety of remarkable people who orbit his life; they reflect that he is somebody around whom many people feel comfortable, safe. For instance, his friend Red, a Vietnam veteran, admits to have liked killing during the war, though confesses his deep shame for blowing up elephants for sport: “They hadnt done anything. And who were they going to see about it? . . . That’s what I regret” (42). Sheddan is quite open with Western about his stints in jail, a psychiatric ward, and whether or not he loves a woman enough to genuinely commit. One of Western's oldest friends is Debussy Fields, a stunning singer and trans woman, who he meets a few times throughout the novel and who he turns to when most vulnerable. Upon a lunch meeting, Western observes that “[e]verything was pushed just to the edge including the cleavage at the front of her dress but she was very beautiful” (62). Fields recounts her painful childhood for Western, how she was rejected by her mother and her father was so cruel that he paid school kids to beat her. Yet she now dons a white gold Patek Philippe Calatrava watch, a gleaming symbol of *haute horologie*, the pinnacle of luxury, and a clear signal she has achieved extraordinary success. Throughout the lunch, Western (and most of the other restaurant's guests) marvel at Field's beauty and attention to detail. As he watches her leave the restaurant at the conclusion of lunch, Western appreciatively observes “that God's goodness appeared in strange places. Dont close your eyes” (71).

McCarthy's bona fides as a contemporary master of American Gothic and an inheritor of Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft are well established by now. In his essay “Philosophy of Composition,” Poe writes that “the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.” Indeed, the subject is one of the defining features of Poe's work. When Western hires a private detective named Kline in an attempt to uncover who is pursuing him, the private eye quickly remarks: “Your sister was something of a beauty” (220). When Western wonders how he would know that, Kline offers: “Because beauty has power to call forth a grief that is beyond the reach of other tragedies. The loss of a great beauty can bring an entire nation to its knees. Nothing else can do that” (220). McCarthy could very well be channeling Poe; however, he elevates the spectral presence of Alicia's death to be the centrifugal force that keeps her brother Bobby's atoms from flying apart and her absence subsumes everything else. Put simply, Western measures time in one unit—grief—and all those who know or encounter him can recognize it.

But Alicia is much more than just a ghostly figure because we are privy to her thoughts on mathematics and various aspects of life as well as her experiences and conversations with the Kid and various other hallucinations. In this way, *The Passenger* can be seen as a dialectic between what McCarthy calls pure number (Alicia) and physics (Bobby); or pure vs. applied mathematics. What is more, the spectral is not confined to one body, as the Kid once visits Bobby when he is living in a rundown shack near a beach. When Western asks the Kid what Alicia knew, the Kid replies: “She knew that in the end you really cant know. You cant get hold of the world. You can only draw a picture. Whether it’s a bull on the wall or a partial differential equation it’s all the same thing” (279).

As Western’s life becomes pared down, monastic even, he returns to mathematics, searching for answers or explanation:

508

He sent to Paris for a collection of Grothendieck’s papers and he sat by lamplight working the problems. After a while they began to make sense, but that wasnt the issue. Nor the French. The issue was the deep core of the world as number. He tried to trace his way back. Find a logical beginning. Riemann’s dark geometry. His christawful symbols [Alicia] had called them. Gödel’s boxes of notes in Gabelsberger. (380)

Western’s exploration—just as the book as a whole—serves as a circular meditation on transience and mourning—that we are all, in fact, passengers riding somebody else’s heels. Sheddan has a characteristically different gloss: “And what are we? Ten percent biology and ninety percent nightrumor” (378). Taken as a whole, *The Passenger* is an extraordinary achievement, synthesizing McCarthy’s work from different periods to innovate and create a narrative with deep empathy, openness, and a generous dose of dark humor, a world where in one moment a drunken friend of Western’s can insist that “he seen a dude in India drink a glass of milk with his dick” (225), and in another, an elderly patient committed to the same psychiatry hospital as Alicia reminds Western, “Everyone is born with the faculty to see the miraculous. You have to choose not to” (324). Since *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* are likely to be McCarthy’s last books given his recent passing, it is difficult to envision a more astounding coda to his singular body of work.

Mark Tardi is a writer and translator whose recent awards include a PEN/Heim Translation Grant and a 2022 National Endowment for the Arts Translation fellowship. He is the author of three books, most recently, *The Circus of Trust* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2017), and his

translations of *The Squatters' Gift* by Robert Rybicki (Dalkey Archive Press) and *Faith in Strangers* by Katarzyna Szaulińska (Toad Press/Veliz Books) were published in 2021. Recent writing and translations have appeared in *Czas Kultury*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The Scores*, *Full Stop*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The Millions*, *Interim*, *Circumference*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Berlin Quarterly*, and in the edited volumes, *Odmiany Łapania Tchu* (Dom Literatury w Łodzi, 2022), *New Voices: Contemporary Writers Confront the Holocaust* (Valentine Mitchell, 2023), and *The Experiment Will Not Be Bound* (Unbound Edition Press, 2023). He is on faculty at the University of Łódź.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9054-8189>

mark.tardi@uni.lodz.pl