
Jay Ellis. *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 356p.

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When writing about the works of living authors, critics have good reason to mistrust their source materials. Jay Ellis, from the Program for Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Colorado, provides here a comprehensive discussion of space and flight in the novels of Cormac McCarthy. *No Place for Home* appeared only two months before the publication of *The Road* (2006), and it is obvious that Ellis' study would have been better for including references to the novelist's most recent work—not because Oprah Winfrey since brought McCarthy to her teeming audience but rather as *The Road* is, itself, organized around the epitome of desperate journeys. There is no escaping this unfortunate and understandable blemish, but rather than dwelling on the vagaries of academic publishing it is far more useful for readers instead simply to judge the efficacy of the model Ellis constructs against the achievement of McCarthy's latest work. For all its horror and bleakness, no one could argue that *The Road* represents a radical departure for McCarthy, and so one test of Ellis' book is how well it anticipates where his subject moves next.

As it is, Ellis reads nine novels, from *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) to *No Country for Old Men* (2005). His interest in McCarthy's prose began with a straightforward appreciation of the author's language, the vividness with which the often-desolate landscapes are drawn in these novels and the economy with which intricate processes are set out for curious readers. Indeed, McCarthy reserves for his own use a language seemingly unavailable to his characters, creating in the process one of the strongest authorial presences in contemporary American literature. But, in fact, *No Place for Home* actually proceeds from the belief that place is most important to the achievement of these novels, more important to carrying these stories than even the characters McCarthy draws. The plots are all set in reaction to houses: the connections of characters with them, the wanderlust they instill, how characters flee from them to seek alternate spaces. Ellis finds greater complexity in this flight, rejecting romantic readings of frontier ruggedness, noting that McCarthy's characters always lose their way. For this reason, flight never glorifies a life on the run; these novels cannot be read as elegies for the road. McCarthy's descriptions of travel emphasize image over movement, and the flights appear as tortured quests that seek to tame larger physical spaces with the hope, presumably, that larger emotional spaces may be similarly mastered. Notably, McCarthy's characters never seem to find that for which they search.

Jay Ellis is unapologetic in writing a study that refuses to focus on plot. If you are unfamiliar with McCarthy's fiction, you will trace the outlines of the stories here to appreciate their significance without gaining greater knowledge of the physical action itself. Equally noteworthy is the fact that comparatively less attention is paid to what many people recognize as McCarthy's greatest achievement, the three novels that make up his "Border trilogy": *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). Still, Ellis' discussion of places and the people who pass through them is vivid and quite thorough, perhaps never more so than in his reading of *Child of God* (1973), a work that is after all rooted in its main character's reaction to home. Ultimately, the real achievement of the critic is his ability to take earthy material and underline for his readers the scope of its most heartening impacts. The trope that is most pervasive in this regard is that of arcs within arcs, representing the transcendental implications of the mundane gestures of McCarthy's characters. From the simplest example of Billy Parham flipping a glowing cigarette butt in *Cities of the Plain*, for example, Ellis imagines other arcs that trace the possibility of predestination, as the imagination empowered in these novels range from thoughts of the grave to the soaring limits of the western landscape. Where Ellis leaves us, as suggested above, is with the conservative outlook of *No Country for Old Men*, where all roads have been traveled and all possibilities presumably exhausted. One can only imagine that the critic's disappointment in this regard is salvaged by the potential uncovered on the concluding pages of *The Road*, where the landscape opens up for us one more time. Finally, *No Place for Home* transcends any question about the timing of its publication to situate McCarthy's achievement as distinctive within contemporary American fiction. While other novelists are elusive and arch, Cormac McCarthy is shown to stare directly at our existential suffering, even as all his characters turn and run. ✱