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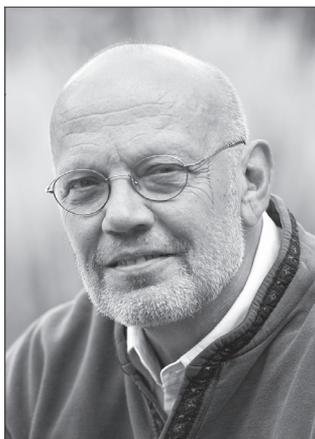
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Frost like ashes:

Review essay of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*



by James C. Schaap

Dr. James Calvin Schaap is Professor of English at Dordt College and the author of 25 books of various genres. His stories and articles have been honored by the Associated Church Press, the Evangelical Press Association, and the Iowa Arts Council. He authored Dordt's Jubilee play, *Vision at Work and Play*; a history of the Christian Reformed Church, *Our Family Album*; as well as devotionals and the World War II biography of Diet Eman, *Things We Couldn't Say*. His novel *Touches the Sky* was given an Award of Merit by *Christianity Today* in 2004, as was his *Startling Joy*, a collection of Christmas stories, in 2005. In 2006, he published three books—*Speaking of Pastors*, *Crossing Over: Stories of Asian Refugee Christians*, and *In His Feathers: the Letters and Journals of Sharon Bomgaars*. In addition he wrote the original script for the documentary *The Reckoning*, a film which won first place this year in the New York Film Festival. He has been teaching literature and writing at Dordt College for thirty-one years.

“He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes.” Psalm 147:16.

I wouldn't wish the apocalypse on anyone. I've never been particularly attracted to stories or novels or films that pitch survivors into the living hell of post-nuclear-holocaust madness, or a blackened earth sprung out of orbit by some errant heavenly asteroid. Anxiety rises in me easily enough; I don't need more than I have, especially when it swells up from a burned-out world I simply don't want to imagine.

But I loved Cormac McCarthy's new novel *The Road*, which is pure and unadulterated apocalypse, vividly—unrelentingly—evoked.

Something's happened to our world—what, McCarthy doesn't tell us. Maybe ten years before the story begins, everything went up in smoke, triggering mass starvation and death. Those few still walking spend their days and nights foraging for food and clothing, fuel and shelter, trying to stay alive in a nightmare. Many do the unimaginable simply to keep breathing.

Fire must have raged everywhere because no matter where the story brings us, the landscape is gray and wan; even snow seems ashen. Sullied rain falls throughout the novel, and the color green has vanished so vast a conflagration must have reigned. Nights are dark as pitch, but there is a day even though the sun is shrouded, and there are few shadows.

A man and his young son are pushing a shopping cart with what they have left, moving slowly south to the coast in search, it seems, of warmer weather. The man has a handgun, and, at the out-

set, two bullets. We don't know exactly why father and son are on the road, probably because nothing was left of the place where they'd been able to stay alive since whatever cataclysm that turned the world to cinder.

There are echoes of Job here. The mother is gone, having taken her own life for reasons which are clear and even forgivable. Hunger—starvation—has created monsters in human form. All along the way, the boy begs his father to distinguish the two of them from the “bad guys” around them—his father promises never to eat a human being. Yet amid the wretchedness, we understand how tenuous that well-meant pledge is. Such is life down the agonizing emptiness of *The Road*.

The novel is prophetic in a way that has nothing to do with politics. It is not a Jeremiad. Cormac McCarthy is not warning his readers of the decline of the West or some penultimate cultural clash. The scenario is nightmare, but there's no agenda—political or environmental or cultural.

Because there is no agenda, the story takes on the trappings of a fable. Despite its bitter horrors and beastly characters, its desolate world and desolated environment, love triumphs. It's not possible to say what I mean in those very words—love triumphs—because anything we might connect to that subject-and-verb seems empty and clichéd. What shines through the devastation of stark end-times horror is respect and trust; what triumphs in the ruins is unwavering human commitment.

The Road begs you to believe, to have faith that even in the darkest of our possibilities, there can be light. Transcendent faith is all there is and all there is left in the apocalypse.

Some find that a strange note for a writer not generally known for optimism or even a modicum of hope. His contribution to American literature is already secure with his Border Trilogy (*The Crossing, Cities of the Plain, All the Pretty Horses*), novels recognizable for their dark view of human character and the human condition.

But here, amid McCarthy's characteristically eccentric prose style, the unconditional love between father and son is a testimony, strangely, to the faith that we are more, somehow, than the darkness both around and within.

This novel is not a joy to read—let's be frank. But its fable-like character offers unmistakable hope which shines even more brightly in a world that has lost the sun.

Psalm 147 contains an odd line that seems drawn, ironically enough, from McCarthy's short and brutal but not hopeless novel: “He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes.” I came upon that line a week or so after finishing *The Road*, and it brought me back to McCarthy's haunting novel. I have no idea what the psalmist was imagining when he wrote that God scatters the frost like ashes, but somewhere therein is the suggestion of conflagration and sadness.

But the theme of the song the psalmist is singing in 147 is praise, praise, and more praise, his heart so full of faith and joy that he may well sing better than he thinks.

And that's okay. Sometimes we all do—and must. And I believe him, just as I do Cormac McCarthy. Faith still sustains the heart of our every moment—yesterday, today, and tomorrow, whatever that tomorrow might be.