

cities of the plain border trilogy 3 cormac mccarthy

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Introduction

When Cormac McCarthy first turned the page on his **Border Trilogy**, he set a new standard for the American Western. The series—comprising *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and the final installment, *Cities of the Plain*—offers a raw, unflinching look at the frontier, the lawless expanse that exists between Texas and Mexico. Readers and scholars alike have long debated the significance of the trilogy's closing volume, but few can deny that *Cities of the Plain* is a masterful culmination of McCarthy's exploration of identity, violence, and the relentless march of time. In this article, we'll dive deep into the third book of the Border Trilogy, examining its plot, themes, characters, and its place within the larger literary landscape.

Overview of the Border Trilogy

The Border Trilogy traces the journey of a young cowboy named John Grady Cole as he navigates the treacherous world of the 1930s American Southwest. McCarthy's narrative arc spans three distinct yet thematically intertwined novels:

- All the Pretty Horses (1992) – John Grady's first encounter with the harsh realities of the Mexican borderlands.
- The Crossing (1994) – A more introspective look at the boy's moral compass as he faces increasing danger.
- Cities of the Plain (1998) – The final chapter that brings the story full circle, confronting the consequences of a life spent on the frontier.

Each book builds upon the last, creating a narrative that is as much about the land as it is about the characters who inhabit it.

Introducing Cities of the Plain

Publication History and Reception

Published in 1998, *Cities of the Plain* quickly established itself as a critical success. The novel won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Critics praised McCarthy's ability to blend lyrical prose with brutal realism, a hallmark that defines the entire Border Trilogy.

Why the Title Matters

The title itself—*Cities of the Plain*—captures the paradox of civilization amid desolation. The “plain” evokes the vast, sunbaked landscapes that dominate the story, while the “cities” refer to the small, often forgotten settlements that dot the border. This duality reflects the novel's central tension between humanity's yearning for community and the indifferent forces of nature.

Plot Summary

While spoilers are best avoided, a concise overview will provide context for the deeper analysis that follows. The novel follows John Grady as he travels to the border town of El Paso, Texas, in search of Lacey, a woman he believes will help him find meaning. Along the way, he encounters a host of colorful characters—farmers, soldiers, and fellow cowboys—each with their own stories of loss and hope. The narrative unfolds in a series of vignettes

that gradually reveal the impact of war, migration, and the relentless passage of time on the people of the border.

As John Grady navigates the complex social fabric of the region, he confronts his own identity, the weight of his past, and the looming specter of violence. The novel's climax is both a literal and symbolic confrontation with the forces that have shaped his life, culminating in a moment that forces him—and the reader—to confront the inevitability of change.

Themes and Motifs

The Border as a Landscape of Lawlessness

McCarthy's portrayal of the border is less a physical line on a map and more an ever-shifting, almost mythical boundary. The region is a place where legal systems blur, and survival often depends on personal codes of honor. This theme is explored through John Grady's interactions with lawmen, smugglers, and local residents, illustrating how the concept of law is fluid in the frontier.

The Role of Memory and Identity

Memory serves as both a compass and a prison. John Grady's recollections of his childhood and early adventures anchor him, yet they also haunt him. The novel examines how past experiences shape present choices, and how the longing for a simpler, more innocent past can become an obstacle to growth.

Religion and the Search for Redemption

Religion is a recurring motif throughout the Border Trilogy, and *Cities of the Plain* is no exception. Characters frequently turn to faith—or its absence—as a means of coping with trauma and loss. McCarthy uses religious imagery to underscore the moral ambiguity of the frontier, suggesting that redemption is often found in the most unlikely places.

Character Analysis

John Grady Cole

John Grady is the central figure whose journey defines the trilogy. In the third book, he has matured from a naive dreamer into a seasoned, if weary, cowboy. His internal conflict—balancing his desire for love and stability against the harsh realities of the border—drives the narrative forward.

Lacey

Lacey is a pivotal character who represents hope and possibility. Her presence challenges John Grady's preconceived notions of love and companionship, forcing him to confront his own fears and insecurities.

The Villagers and the Border

The supporting characters—farmers, soldiers, and other cowboys—add depth to the story, each embodying different facets of frontier life. Their interactions with John Grady provide insight into the community's collective psyche and the broader social dynamics at play.

Writing Style and Narrative Techniques

McCarthy's Poetic Prose

One of McCarthy's most celebrated techniques is his use of poetic language to describe the landscape. His sentences often read like short poems, capturing the stark beauty of the desert while also hinting at its underlying menace.

The Use of Dialogue and Silence

Dialogue in *Cities of the Plain* is sparse but purposeful. When characters speak, their words carry significant weight, often revealing more about their inner lives than explicit exposition. Silence, too, is a powerful tool—McCarthy uses pauses and unspoken moments to convey tension and emotional depth.

Critical Reception and Legacy

Contemporary Reviews

Upon its release, critics praised the novel for its lyrical prose, complex characters, and the way it tied together the narrative threads of the trilogy. Many reviewers highlighted the novel's ability to capture the essence of the borderlands while addressing universal themes of love, loss, and survival.

Academic Perspectives

Scholars have examined the novel from a variety of angles—postcolonial theory, literary geography, and comparative literature. A common thread in academic discussions is the idea that *Cities of the Plain* serves as a critique of American expansionism and the myth of the frontier.

The Place of *Cities of the Plain* in Modern Western Literature

While the Western genre has long been associated with the romanticized image of the American frontier, *Cities of the Plain* pushes the genre beyond its traditional boundaries. McCarthy's realistic portrayal of violence, his emphasis on moral ambiguity, and his philosophical musings on identity have influenced a generation of writers who seek to reinterpret the Western in contemporary terms.

Why Readers Should Dive into the Trilogy

The Journey Through the Three Books

Reading the trilogy as a whole offers a richer, more nuanced understanding of John Grady's evolution. Each book builds upon the last, creating a layered narrative that rewards patient, attentive readers.

How the Third Book Wraps the Trilogy

The final installment ties together the thematic threads introduced in the earlier novels. It resolves lingering questions while leaving enough ambiguity to provoke thought, making it a satisfying yet thought-provoking conclusion.

Conclusion

In the end, *Cities of the Plain* stands as a testament to Cormac McCarthy's mastery of storytelling and his unique vision of the American West. The novel's intricate blend of lyrical prose, complex characters, and profound themes ensures its place among the most influential works of contemporary Western literature. Whether you're a longtime fan of the Border Trilogy or a newcomer seeking a deeper understanding of the genre, this third book offers a compelling, unforgettable journey that invites readers to confront the harsh realities of the border and the enduring hope that lies within it.

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