



No Country for Old Men

Javier Bardem and Tommy Lee Jones star in a film adapted and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, based on the novel by Cormac McCarthy.

By Josef Woodard

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Early in this latest Coen brothers film — a darkly funny, and then plainly dark adventure that ranks at the top of their films so far — our everyman protagonist (Josh Brolin) happens upon a grisly after-the-carnage scene. Somewhere in the Texan desert, a posse of lifeless trucks and bullet-ridden corpses suggests a drug deal gone very wrong, but our attention and compassion are mainly drawn to the dead dog in the bunch — our movie-going senses have trained us to disregard dead criminals, but shed a tear for offed animals.

Such smart and playful tweaking of clichés and perceptions has long been a part of the Coen brothers' genius, and has made their filmography one of the strongest in current American cinema. With their latest, the brothers have outdone themselves, hitting us first with blood-soaked humor, and then with a sobering allegorical knife twist.

Based on the novel by Cormac (*All the Pretty Horses*) McCarthy, the script captures a clipped, pared-down wit in its first segment, and then takes a surprising turn toward eloquence, becoming a sobering parable with contemporary overtones. Early on, a deputy looks at the aforementioned bloodbath with the sheriff (Tommy Lee Jones, who disarmingly blends Andy Griffith and a doomsday sage). Deputy: "It's a mess, ain't it, Sheriff?" Sheriff: "If it ain't, it'll do 'til the mess gets here." And it does indeed get there.

Much of the film draws us into the particulars of the chase between the icily determined killer (Javier Bardem) and the welder-turned-millionaire. For all its grit and blood, though, there's a presiding elegance to the film, especially through Roger Deakins's coolly imaginative cinematography and the film's inspired and refreshing lack of music.

It would be neater and easier — and less haunting — if we could just pass off the film as artful pulp where drug money, a badass villain, and the maze of good and evil cleverly work their way toward resolution. But something deeper and more disturbing seeps into this film, and themes of the doggedness and banality of evil push it into the realm of poetry and prophecy.

Suddenly, the message hits close to home in a world gripped by ideology-driven terrorists and a larger sense that we really can't stop what's comin' — making it stunning on more than one level.