

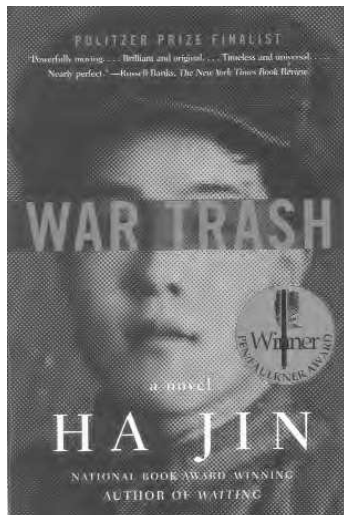
War, 1951. Yuan, with no military training to speak of, is advised by his commanding officer, Commissar Pei, to bring along with him an English-Chinese dictionary to "serve as a unique weapon." Yuan describes Pei: "He was a tall man of thirty-two, with a bronzed face and a receding hair-line. Whenever I was with him, I could feel the inner strength of this man, who had been a dedicated revolutionary since his early teens."

Yuan is not a revolutionary. Apolitical, he wisely keeps to himself. He's worried about his old mother, alone now, and he misses his fiancée. The soldiers attend compulsory meetings designed to drum up war fever. Here's Yuan's partial description of the 800-man Chinese army gingerly crossing a bridge over the Yalu River into Korea:

"Each man kept ten feet from the one in front of him. The water below was dark, hissing and plunging. Now and then someone would cry out, his foot having fallen through a hole. A tall mule, drawing a cart, got its hind leg stuck in a rift and couldn't dislodge it no matter how madly the driver thrashed its hindquarters. The moment I passed the tilted cart, it shook, then keeled over and fell into the river together with the helpless animal. There was a great splash, followed by an elongated whirlpool in the shimmering current, and then the entire load of medical supplies vanished."

I cite this at such length because it is the perfect metaphor for the entire war from Yuan's educated viewpoint. They are the "war trash" left on their own by the Chinese government without weapons, food, medicine or reinforcements; lost in the dark rivers of a foreign land.

An American offensive in the air and on the ground quickly engages the troops in battle. Pei tries to save his footsore, hungry men, but many are overrun. Yuan, Pei and a few others get away but soon come upon 300 injured, sick and starving men abandoned by their officers. Later with 80 survivors, Yuan and Pei fight like guerillas for three months before they are captured and sent to POW camps.



Now begins Yuan's true story, told as a memoir. At the mercy of various inscrutable Chinese factions within the camps, Yuan proves useful as a translator in negotiations with their captors. A compelling story of daily life under hardship, Ha Jin's greatest accomplishment is Yu Yuan, the reliable narrator, a memorable, civilized man I will never forget. Ha Jin teaches English at Boston University and won

the National Book Award for his first novel, *Waiting*. Sublime. — Lois Wadsworth

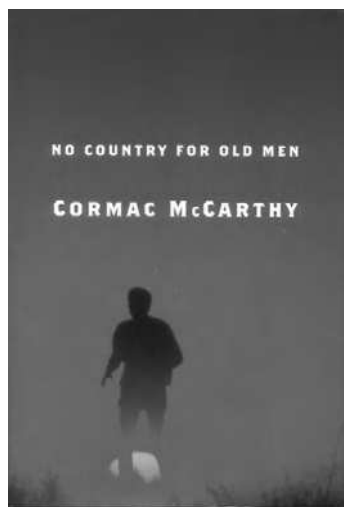
NO MAN'S LAND

No Country for Old Men by Cormac McCarthy. Knopf, 2005. Hardcover, \$24.95. **A New York Times Notable Book of the Year 2005.**

Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* is set farther into modernity than his previous works, yet the urges driving the men who careen through his new novel are as primal as those possessed by the cowboys, killers and prophets who populate his other novels of the West. The premise is familiar: A man comes upon something that is not his and takes it against his better judgment, then spends the rest of the story running from parties unwilling to brook the loss.

Here, the man is Llewelyn Moss, and what's not his is \$2 million left unattended in the desert as the result of a mutually fatal shootout between parties to a heroin deal. Unattended, but not forgotten. Setting the story in motion, Moss returns to the scene, an obstinate act that fulfills the dictates of a code he follows despite knowing it could destroy him.

McCarthy's prose is as spare as the Texas landscape through which Moss flees, making *No Country for Old Men* a departure from the



Faulknerian style of previous work. The style matches the story, though, and McCarthy's gifts are manifest in his ability to co-opt crime novel formulas to his grand purpose: the philosophical exploration of our relationship with violence.

A frenetic dream of men and guns, the book sketches the latter more tenderly than the former. Yet this new novel is neither a continuation of McCarthy's Plains Trilogy nor a return to the full fury of *Blood Meridian*. Instead, it is an impeccably crafted genre novel. With McCarthy's singular gifts, the book's pure enjoyment illustrates that even the barest of plots flourish in the proper hands. — Chris Ledford

EMERALD CITY

Son of a Witch by Gregory Maguire. ReganBooks, HarperCollins, 2005. Hardcover, \$26.95.

When the Wicked Witch of the West, Elphaba Thropp, met her inevitable end in Gregory Maguire's *Wicked*, few readers thought much, if anything, of the boy who'd tagged along with her to her castle. But lonely, picked-on Liir becomes the subject in this sequel, which meanders through memory and history to answer some pressing questions: Is Liir really the Witch's son? What does that mean? And how did he come to be lying in the grasslands, nearly every bone in his body broken?

While Liir lies in a coma, the story runs with his unconscious thoughts through his life since Elphaba's death. With the Witch's broom and cape in hand, Liir leaves the castle with Dorothy and her troupe, but they melt away in the Emerald City. After trying to find his possible half-sister, Nor, Liir joins the Emerald City's military, for what else is a penniless orphan to do?

Military life at first suits Liir, who grows to value his unremarkableness. Determined to be talentless and bland and not to claim his possible

birthright, he nevertheless can't ignore the unpleasant responsibility that comes his way. Shaken, Liir deserts the army, only to be swept up in greater events that bring out the passion in the steely young man.

Liir's is a tale of reluctant self-discovery, as introspective as it is adventurous — even once he's woken from his coma by the strange gifts of the novice nun, Candle. On first read, it's clear that the book isn't quite on par with the delicious ingenuity of *Wicked*, but it is still a sleepy, enticing tale with striking, memorable characters and an ending that suggests it is not the end of the story. But we readers are not the only ones who miss the sharp-tongued presence of the Witch herself. On the walls and in the very air above the Emerald City, a heartfelt, rebellious slogan lingers: "Elphaba lives!"

— Molly Templeton

FREUDIAN SLAPSTICK

Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch by Dai Sijie. Knopf, 2005. Hardcover, \$22.

His novel is a quixotic search for truth, justice and the Asian way; a theatric of the absurd played out in desperate alleys and ramshackle bus stations across the Land of the Grinning Dragon; and a flash of whimsical realism that would startle and bemuse shamans from Copper Canyon to Kamchatka.

Mr. Muo studied psychoanalysis in Paris and has just returned to 21st century China to introduce his people to the wonders of Western shrinkdom. He also plans to liberate his college sweetheart, a political prisoner jailed for publishing photographs documenting government torture. The judge who sentenced Muo's daring darling explains that he'll spring her if provided with a nubile virgin for his own delights. Thus begins Muo's chivalric if ludicrous quest to fulfill his part of this devil's bargain.

Dai Sijie, author of the best-selling novel now a movie, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, takes Muo into a creepy mortuary operated by a strangely compelling woman who helps him lose his virginity over a wild mountaintop road where fierce, acrobatic bandits leap on passing trucks, through a panda habitat overseen by a mystic healer who collects panda scat for a living, and into



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