

**Stephen Tatum. Cormac McCarthy's All the Pretty Horses: A Reader's Guide. New York: Continuum Books, 2002. Pp. 96. Paper: \$9.95. ISBN: 0826452469.**

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The publication of Stephen Tatum's reader's guide to *All the Pretty Horses* marks the first appearance of a targeted critique of one of Cormac McCarthy's novels since John Sepich's *Notes on Blood Meridian* in 1993. This is a comfortably written, inexpensive book that successfully combines brevity with substantial discussion. It is also, for the most part, unencumbered by much weighty professional jargon.

As a result, the book should prove especially useful for senior level high school students willing to stretch just a bit, undergraduate college students, and seriously interested lay readers alike. No doubt it will be especially welcomed by teachers who need to concern themselves not only with the level at which critical analysis is pitched, but also with the dent that such a book will make in their students' wallets. In fact Tatum, who often teaches the novel, notes that his experience in teaching it had much to do with the way he framed this book: "What interested me about the reader's guide concept—and this was also the challenge—concerned how to convey McCarthy's special vision in critical prose that might interest BOTH general readers as well as specialists. The series is intended for teachers, students, and book group readers, and I thought producing this volume would teach me more about McCarthy's novel and in turn enhance MY next teaching experience with it."

The book is divided into five sections: The Novelist, The Novel, The Novel's Reception, The Novel's Performance and Further Readings and Discussion Questions. The second section is, perhaps predictably, the longest. The first is a more or less *pro forma* biographical study and overview of McCarthy's basic themes. There isn't much in the way of revelatory research here but, in keeping with the book's adherence to function, it does put the author's background in the context of his thematic concerns in a concise way. Moreover, Tatum tells his readers – many of whom might be coming to McCarthy for the first time – just enough about the other works and the subject novel's place in the canon to stimulate their interest in delving further into the author's work. Wrapping up this section, Tatum deftly summarizes a handful of key themes and stylistic conventions of the novel to set up his ensuing discussions. He is especially attuned to the interrelationship between narrative, meta-narrative and character development, a key triad of concerns in the novel. Moreover, he alerts his target

audience to this amalgam without oversimplifying or swamping them with complex ironies. For example, Tatum writes: “One of McCarthy’s stylistic signatures underlines the contingent ‘open’ world that survives amidst the constraints closing down on human agency: when his narrator deploys a series of sentence fragments introduced by the subjunctive expression ‘as if,’ we see how each fragment offers a different explanatory perspective on whatever action or thought has initiated the sequence, thus troubling the notion that any one perspective can provide total knowledge” (24).

Tatum uses this concluding strophe to Part I to set up his axial discussion of John Grady’s telling of his own tale to the children of La Vega in the last chapter of the novel. Here, again, he is particularly concerned about focusing the reader’s attention on the different levels of storytelling that operate within McCarthy’s total narrative. This, once again, prepares his reader for his chapter-by-chapter review; it is sufficient for our purposes here to note that Tatum makes a point of reconnecting the various threads of his own discussion periodically throughout his treatments of each chapter. The result is a satisfying sense of critical continuity and should leave most readers feeling comfortable with the overall movement and thematic development of McCarthy’s most popular work.

The next two sections deal, respectively, with the critical reception of the book and, in a logical progression, with the sales, popularity, and mixed destiny of the story in Hollywood. As Tatum explained to me, he decided to work with a twin focus on the text and its context because “in the end what drew me to McCarthy’s work [was], unsurprisingly, the prose itself and his skill with narrative dynamics. And so I opted to make that the focus of the interpretive chapter and raise the cultural studies issues as questions or ongoing debates at different points in different chapters.” These sections are just about rightly proportioned, and acknowledge that the text functions not only within itself as a work of art but also as a commodity operating within a broader cultural context. I like this approach insofar as it avoids a common pitfall of neo-modernist criticism by not promulgating the illusion that works of literary art or popular literature – to the extent that we may make that distinction – function in a social and economic vacuum.

The final section suggests several perceptive and stimulating questions for discussion, and also contains a fairly extensive reading list and suggestions for further research. This section makes the book even more useful as an academic aide. “I have come away from putting this guide together with greater respect and affection for *ATPH* and also for the early critical work on the novel,” Tatum notes, and that respect and affection are evident not only in his frequent incorporation of existing scholarship in his discussion, but also in his recommendations for further reading. He has clearly done his homework in preparation for writing this book; part of its

value is that Tatum often takes a moment in the course of his analyses to acknowledge and discuss any number of prevailing critical responses to particular aspects of the work in particular and to McCarthy's *oeuvre* in general. Like any number of McCarthy's critical defenders – among whom Tatum clearly positions himself – one of the author's pet peeves is the argument that the novelist's vision is "nihilistic." He does a thoroughgoing job of refuting that position, often by invoking ambiguity in place of nihilism as when he notes that "Cole [. . .]recognizes the world's 'secret' reality centers on the exchange of 'the blood of multitudes' for a single flower's beauty" (66).

Overall, this reviewer highly recommends Tatum's reader's guide especially to those teaching the novel, coming to it for the first time, or just interested in refreshing their recollections of and responses to *All the Pretty Horses*.