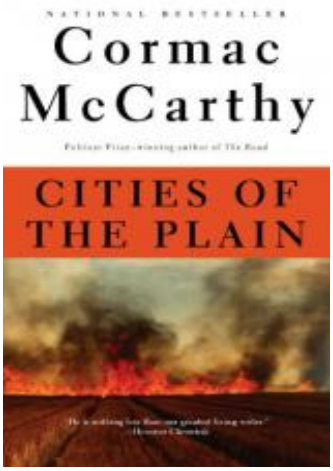
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Cities of the Plain

by Cormac McCarthy



About the Book

The time is the early 1950s, the place the Border country of New Mexico. Nearby, in Alamogordo, the nuclear tests that resulted in the first hydrogen bomb have recently been conducted. The cowboy and his horse are a thing of the past, a glorious and tragic anachronism. Here we meet John Grady Cole of **All the Pretty Horses** and Billy Parham of **The Crossing**, both now working as cowboys on a ranch that will very soon be taken over by the U.S. Army and tamed forever. One night the young men and their fellow workers cross the border to spend a fateful evening at a Juarez whorehouse. There John Grady meets a beautiful, vulnerable sixteen-year-old Mexican girl, Magdalena, held in virtual slavery by her sinister pimp and lover, Eduardo. John Grady determines to spirit her away from Eduardo and back to the United States with him, and enlists the help of the sympathetic but doubtful Billy. The story of their quest and its bloody outcome, brilliantly depicted by a writer who has proved himself one of the great prose stylists of our time, makes for a resonant fable of past and present, of wilderness and civilization, of cruelty and honor.

Discussion Guide

1. What is the significance of the novel's title? What were the original "cities of the plain," and what do they correspond to within the novel?

2. What role do horses play in the book, and how are they characterized? How are the "souls" of horses seen to differ from those of men?

3. **Cities of the Plain** is in many respects a novel about the inevitability and tragedy of change. What events and situations has McCarthy used to dramatize that subject? "The war changed everything," says Billy. "I dont think people even know it yet" [p. 78]. What, precisely, has it changed? Which characters adjust to the changes, and which are unwilling or incapable of doing so?

4. What does the statement "beauty and loss are one" [p. 71] mean, and how does the novel illustrate this contention?

5. Of Magdalena, the old blind man says, "My belief is that she is at best a visitor. At best. She does not belong here. Among us" [p. 81]. What does he mean by this statement, and how is his premonition borne out? Can Magdalena's end be seen as inevitable, within the novel's particular world? What other predictions or auguries are offered in the novel? Do they add to the suspense or detract from it?

6. Which characters in the novel function as archetypes, and what do they represent? Do these archetypal characters keep them from being believable personalities?

7. Which of the characters have been affected by the Mexican Revolution, and in what ways has the Revolution changed their lives and helped to form their world? What are their feelings about the Revolution in retrospect?

8. How do you react to the many instances of violence in the novel? Do they seem gratuitous, or integral to the story? Is the graphic description of individual acts of violence included for mere titillation or shock value, or is it necessary in making the reader truly understand and come to terms with the novel's time and setting?

9. In spite of the widespread violence in the Border country, it is also a place in which people are unusually hospitable, at least by modern urban standards. Archer describes his travels through Mexico after the Revolution: "They didnt have no reason to be hospitable to anybody. Least of all a gringo kid. That plateful of beans they set in front of you was hard come by. But I was never turned away. Not a time" [p. 90]. What other examples of unusual hospitality can you find in the book? Is this hospitality connected in some way with the everyday violence that affects these people's lives?

10. In **Cities of the Plain** Mexico is characterized as female, the United States as male. What is the reason for this dichotomy, and how has McCarthy achieved the effect? In what ways is the southwestern United States qualitatively different from Mexico, just across the border? What does Mac mean when he reflects that, "In Mexico there is no God. Just her [the Virgin]" [p. 116]?

11. Billy says to John Grady, "You know you been actin peculiar since you had that wreck?" [p. 121] Is that true? If so, what happened during the wreck to alter John Grady's behavior or change his thinking?

12. What does the blind man mean when he tells John Grady, "Your love has no friends. You think that it does but it does not. None. Perhaps not even God" [p. 199]? Why does it have no friends? Why is it impossible that John Grady and Magdalena's love should ever succeed? Is John Grady aware of the impossibility, or does his love blind him to reality?

13. Billy says that Mexico is "another world. Everbody I ever knew that ever went back was goin after somethin" [p. 218]. What is John Grady going after? To what extent is he aware of his needs and his motivations? Eduardo says that John Grady is seeking death. Is he right? Why would John Grady choose death over life? Why is Billy different, opting for life, however diminished?

14. Who is the mysterious stranger that Billy, in old age, meets on the highway? What is the significance of the long story he tells, and what relation does it bear to Billy's life?

15. "In everything that he'd ever thought about the world and about his life in it he'd been wrong" [p. 265], Billy reflects

as an old man. Which of his opinions were proved wrong? How does the world differ from the one he had thought he knew, and in what ways is old Billy different from young Billy?

16. Who is the real hero of this story: John Grady or Billy? Does the author play with conventional notions of what makes a hero? How do these young men fit into the chivalric tradition, and which earlier literary heroes do each of them resemble?

Author Bio

The novels of the American writer Cormac McCarthy have received a number of literary awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. His works adapted to film include ALL THE PRETTY HORSES, THE ROAD and NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN --- the latter film receiving four Academy Awards, including the award for Best Picture. In June 2023, McCarthy passed away of natural causes at the age of 89.

Critical Praise

"Showcases Mr. McCarthy's gifts as an old-fashioned storyteller.... His most readable, emotionally engaging novel yet. "

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