

No Country for Old Men-2007: Leave it to the younger generation to f*** things up good.

There are probably no film-makers to match the Coen brothers with regard to the crime/thriller genre. From the seminal *Blood Simple* (1984), on to *Miller's Crossing* (1990), thence to the chilling *Fargo* (1996) and now, finally, what must be viewed as a masterpiece of cinematography, editing and storytelling. They've done quirky comedies and dramas along the way, but, for my money, nobody beats these brothers when it comes to thrillers that are also horrific.

A good story is a prime requirement, of course: score ten-for-ten, straight up. Then the characters: down-to-earth Texans and Mexicans, tough as nails, the good and the horrifically bad. They're all there in a cast that meshes beautifully to produce a relentless pursuit across the flat, almost featureless, quasi-moonscape of the Texas deserts and low-down border towns.

As the fade-in begins, there is the voice-over by Sheriff Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) as the camera pans across the ochre plains and rocky outcrops, and you might think how appropriate the title is. You're right, but it's more than that, of course, being a metaphor for the times: a society almost ruined by drug-running, incessant murders and killings, and the mindless pursuit of money. This is the over-arching theme with which the Coens ring out the tragedy that unfolds as Sheriff Bell tries to catch up with Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) who's got two million dollars of dirty money that the bad guys are trying to find.

In a few words, here's the basic story: Moss finds two million at the site of a drug gang battle in the Texas desert. He takes the money and runs. Unknown to him, a sociopathic hit man, Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem) is hot on his trail to recover the money and kill Moss. At the same time, Sheriff Bell is hot on the trail of Chigurh, who's left a series of dead victims along the highways and byways. So, Moss sends his wife, Carla (Kelly Macdonald), away to El Paso (with her mother) for safety reasons, and so that he can contend with the killer on his trail. And, none of them know that members of the Mexican drug gang are following Carla, hoping she'll eventually lead them to Moss.

Essentially, however, it's a story about the contest between Moss and Chigurh: the former, a Vietnam vet who trained to kill; the latter, one of society's nightmares who simply kills – on a whim, on the toss of a coin, and on principle. Bardem's performance is calmly devastating: never raising his voice, never displaying anger, never showing mercy. And professional to his very core. The most disturbing scene is his encounter, early in the plot, with an old clerk at a country gas station who inadvertently annoys Chigurh with an inane but innocuous question. Watching and hearing that exchange of words reveals everything you don't want to know about Chigurh and his penchant for killing.

So, while the basic story (drug gangs, gun battles, innocent victims, good guy-bad guy) has been done before, many times, it's the character driven nature of this story that makes it into a riveting thriller, helped along by the Coen brothers' expertise with camera, script, editing and sound. On that last point, this film is noteworthy with the almost complete absence of a musical score, an aspect that heightened the suspense – because, as the viewer, you're able to hear more easily the far-off sound of ominous steps in a corridor, characters breathing, the snick of a gun being cocked, and so on.

Most stories in film and literature end unambiguously. However, the final scenes between Bell, Ellis (Barry Corbin), the old-time deputy, and Bell's wife, Loretta (Tess Harper) seem to be completely at odds with the main narrative, to the extent that some viewers have been annoyed/infuriated with the apparent lack of closure, according to some reports I've seen. I'll say this much: from one perspective, there's a nod to the ending of *Point Blank* (1967); from another perspective, one must remember that stories are constructed and, therefore, are open to interpretation by the viewer. I have an interpretation that brings full closure for me. It's up to you to develop yours.

Thoroughly recommended, but for adults only. Has gruesome, bloody violence and a killer (Chigurh) with the kinkiest weapon yet put to film.

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