

The Trilogy

The three novels McCarthy published between 1992 and 1998 – *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain* – are known collectively as ‘The Border Trilogy’. It seems that the author planned them as a trilogy; when the first one was published in 1992, it was heralded as the opening volume of a trilogy; and all three books have been published together in one volume. And yet it is not a conventional trilogy. Each novel often

seems complete in itself. The sequence does not always read as if it is intended as one huge narrative. The chief protagonist in the first novel, John Grady Cole, is not the chief protagonist in the second novel, which focuses on the experiences of a boy named Billy Parham. Cole does not even appear in *The Crossing*, which is set some ten years earlier than *All the Pretty Horses*.

It is only after completing the third novel that the reader can look back and admire the overarching structure of McCarthy’s work. As the narrative of *Cities of the Plain* unfolds and brings together John Grady Cole and Billy Parham in one story, the themes that unite the whole trilogy begin to emerge. The personal losses of the two individuals are subsumed in the greater loss of an entire way of life. Their own experiences become emblematic of the vanishing world into which they were born. ‘The Border Trilogy’ is revealed as one vast elegy for the American frontier as it disappears into history.

‘Three fierce,
desolate,
beautiful
novels’
Sunday Times