*No Country for Old Men* by Cormac McCarthy – Study Guide

Chapter 1:

1. Is Anton Chigurh a new kind of killer? Is he a “true and living prophet of destruction,” (4) as Bell thinks? Explain.
2. In the italicized sections of the novel, Sheriff Bell reflects on what he feels is the moral decline and growing violence of the world around him. What is the moral code that Bell lives by? What are his strongest beliefs? How has he acquired these beliefs? (finish reading the novel to completely answer this question)
3. In what ways does Chigurh challenge Bell’s worldview and values?
4. After Llewelyn finds the money and comes home, he decides to go back to the scene of the crime. He tells his wife: “I’m fixin to do something dumbern hell but I’m goin anways” (24). Why does he go back, even though he knows it is a foolish and dangerous thing to do? What does this decision reveal about Llewelyn? What are the consequences of his decision?

Chapter 2:

1. After Bell surveys the carnage in the desert, he tells Lamar: “I just have this feelin we’re looking at something we really aint never even seen before” (46). In what ways is the violence Sheriff Bell encounters different than before?
2. How can Anton Chigurh’s behavior be explained? What motivates him to kill so methodically and heartlessly? How does he regard the people he kills?
3. What does the coin toss (p. 55-57) symbolize to Chigurh, to the gas station proprietor, to McCarthy, to the reader?

Chapter 3:

1. McCarthy has a distinctive prose style - pared down, (lacking proper punctuation), direct, colloquial - and he relies on terse, clipped dialogue rather than narrative exposition to move his story along. In what ways is this style so powerful and so well-suited to the story he tells?

Chapter 4:

1. McCarthy will often tell the reader that one of his characters is “thinking things over” without revealing what the character is thinking about (107). Most novelists describe in great detail what their characters are thinking and feeling. Why does McCarthy choose not to do this? What does he gain by leaving out such information?

Chapter 5:

1. Sheriff Bell says, “The stories gets passed on and the truth gets passed over…. While I reckon some would take as meanin the truth cant compete. But I don’t believe that. I think that when the lies are all told and forgot the truth will be there yet” (123). What incorruptible truths emerge from the story?
2. Why does Sheriff Bell feel so protective of Llewellyn and his wife? In what ways does his past, particularly his war experience, affect his actions in the present?

Chapter 6:

1. Officer Torbert has a motto about truth and justice: “We dedicate ourselves [to it] daily” (168). What is Sheriff Bell’s definition of justice? Chigurh’s?
2. Chigurh tells Carson Wells, “Getting hurt changed me. Changed my perspective…. I’ve sort of caught up with myself…. It was overdue” (173). To what effect does McCarthy use the ambiguity of these lines?
3. What is Chigurh trying to get Carson to see/understand about his life before Chigurh takes it from him?
4. What is significant about Chigurh’s reference, “By the old woman’s calendar I’ve got three more minutes” (178). What are the details of the original incident that is referenced here?

Chapter 7:

1. Chigurh believes that “…fear of an enemy can often blind men to other hazards, not least the shape which they themselves make in the world” (198). How is this true of Moss, of Sheriff Bell?

Chapter 8:

1. Llewellyn tells the young woman he picks up hitchhiking: “Things happen to you they happen. They dont ask first. They dont require your permission (220). Have things simply happened to Llewellyn or does he play a more active role in his fate? Does his life seem fatalistic? How? Why? Give examples.
2. In Moss’ conversation with the young female hitchhiker (227) identify the lines which echo Chigurh’s philosophy of life. What is the tone of the passage? What is the message from McCarthy to the reader?
3. Why does McCarthy have Moss die in a shoot out with an unnamed assailant and not with Chigurh?

Chapter 9:

1. Chigurh returns the remainder of the 2.3 million to its owner. Why? What does his conversation with the owner show about what motivates him?
2. Why does Chigurh offer Carla Jean a coin toss (p. 258)? What is Chigurh trying to get Carla Jean to understand (p. 259)? Is his motivation honorable or evil? Why?
3. Interpret Chigurh’s potentially fatal car crash. Why does McCarthy create such ambiguity about Chigurh’s future? Is it a satisfying ending for the reader? Why or why not?
4. Bell shares with his Uncle Ellis that he ran from a battle to save himself and doesn’t deserve his war hero medal. In that context he acknowledges, “I didnt know you could steal your own life. And I didnt know that it would bring you no more benefit than about anything else you might steal. I think I done the best with it I knew how but it still wasnt mine. It never has been” (278). Interpret quote.
5. Bell says that “I’m not the man of an older time they say I am. I wish I was. I’m a man of this time” (279). Do you agree with his self assessment? Why or why not?

Chapter 10:

1. The title of the novel comes from a line in William Butler Yeats’ poem “Sailing to Byzantium”: “That is no country for old men”…./ The poem also contains these lines: “An aged man is a paltry thing/A tattered coat upon a stick, / Unless soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/ For every tatter in its mortal dress.”

In what ways is *No Country for Old Men* about aging? Does Sheriff Bell experience any kind of spiritual rejuvenation as he ages? Support your answer with evidence.

Chapter 11:

1. Near the end of the novel, Bell says: “I think we are all of us ill prepared for what is to come and I dont care what shape it takes” (295). What kind of future is Bell imagining? Why does he think we are not ready for it? How can *No Country for Old Men* be understood as an apocalyptic novel?

Chapter 12:

1. When asked about the rise in crime in his county, Bell says that “It starts when you begin to overlook bad manners. Any time you quit hearin Sir and Mam the end is pretty much in sight” (304). Is he right about this? Why would deteriorating manners signal a larger social chaos?

Chapter 13:

1. Why does McCarthy choose to end the novel with Bell’s anecdotal musings? Is there a catharsis for Bell? For the reader? Explain.