

THE SISTERS BROTHERS

The author of this western cowboy novel during the gold rush is Patrick de Witt, a Canadian born in 1975 now living in Oregon USA. This, his second novel, was shortlisted for various awards besides The Mann Booker Prize in 2011, although some critics argue that the latter's emphasis on readability was more geared to commercial interests than literary merit and John Vernon in the Sunday Book Review states that the cowboy vernacular is a stylised abstraction.

Yet this novel's picaresque take on frontier Westerns has originality in that two well-known assassins, the Sisters Brothers, contracted by a Commodore ensconced in his mansion in Oregon, display an evolving conscience, humanity and gradual shift to civilisation expressed by the younger brother Eli and followed by the older brother Charlie towards the end of the novel. Although Eli is reluctant to undertake the journey to kill Warm it is the filial love between them that keeps them together.

Eli is the narrator in the novel, written in three chapters: 'Trouble with the Horses', 'California' and 'Herman Kermit Warm', with two dreamlike intermissions that appear to presage Charlie's injuries. The brother's journey is an Odyssey where each encounter with live or dead travellers gives rise to an adventure in Cervantes' Don Quixote style, with humour either in the description of the characters, or thoughts and verbal exchanges between the brothers when in danger or readying themselves for a killing. During the gold rush period life is cheap and killing a common occurrence in which the Sisters brothers excel with accuracy and cunning, Eli nonetheless ponders:

'Why do I relish this reversal to animal?' (p.246).

Description of the countryside is limited to odd woods, rivers, caves, or seasonal weather but becomes quite lyrical when Eli addresses the 'gold rush' territory as:

'Not only aesthetic solace but also golden riches' (p.115)

Warm praises Eli as having a *'touch of the poet in you'* (p.261), for his thoughtfully chosen words on a previous occasion.

The two brothers are well fleshed out as are the many odd travellers encountered such as: the 'crying man' that Eli convinces to accept some food, or the unnerving old woman in a cabin who by stringing beads and hanging them over the door brings to mind a witch like fairy tale image that stops the brothers leaving through this entrance. Whilst slim Charlie can manoeuvre escape through the window, he has to find an axe to enlarge it for rotund Eli. However Eli does cross the 'bewitched' threshold to shoot a grizzly bear, for injuring his horse Tub, not exchanged for a healthier rider less healthy one because of his fondness of the animal. Other characters in trading posts add to Ely's notion that there are other options than being an assassin, whilst seedy hotels offer some shelter and brothels a brief sexual encounter, where Ely on being told that he is overweight decides to go on a not very satisfactory diet, but leaves a coin to the woman thinking:

'I might improve her time on the earth with the devotion of another human being' (p.75)

Charlie meanwhile drinks himself into oblivion and even tries the morphine with unpleasant consequences, given by a down and out dentist to Eli following removal of his rotten tooth. The dentist also provides Eli with tooth powder and a toothbrush, viewed proudly by Eli as a mark of civilization.

As the novel moves on to the second chapter on the way to California, Eli shows his humanity again by giving his share of a killed prospector's gold to a boy previously encountered to help him to return home, although thinking that he will not survive and adds:

'Here is another miserable mental image I will have to catalogue and make room for' (p114).

Before meeting the well described scout Morris in San Francisco, viewed as a fascinating city with all its ships now abandoned in the harbour because of the gold rush fever, they meet Mayfield a rich trader of pelts who cheats the brothers of the sale of a bear skin whilst Charlie is drunk on brandy and Eli falls in love with a woman he believes to be the one for him. Sensing that they are in danger for challenging Mayfield they seek to escape but are cornered by the trappers whom they kill before getting to Mayfield's gold, that although carefully hidden is lost on their return, bar a few coins they had hidden in their boots.

They find Morris' diary and admire his early telephone as a modern invention, before meeting him and Warm surreally described. No longer wishing to assassinate them, the brothers offer their protection in exchange for a share of the gold uncovered with the help of a poisonous chemical solution. Unfortunately it causes the death of Morris and Warm and Charlie loses his shooting hand. Weakened by the injury and hard work, they are unable to defend the obtained gold that is stolen by some Indians.

The brothers return to Oregon without much to show for their troubles that seems a befitting end to a novel that concentrates more on conscience, morality and humanity than daring and/or greed, although Eli does commit a last killing by drowning the Commodore in his bath tub, to liberate themselves from his power. The brothers join their mother after many years, Eli hoping to open a trading post whilst Charlie ponders about a safer occupation, but by the end of the novel there is no certainty that the brothers will stay given their highly adventure laden past.

The Man Booker Prize shortlisting of this novel, aside from its readability and commercial success may perhaps also have been influenced by the originality of the Sisters brothers' nascent conscience and humanity during their often violent and mercenary Odyssey.