

Patrick DeWitt – The Sisters Brothers

Introduction

DeWitt was just thirty-five when his second novel - *The Sisters Brothers* – topped the Amazon bestsellers list and was shortlisted for the 2011 Man Booker prize (losing out to Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*). In the same year, it won the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the Stephen Leacock Medal for humour writing. The novel is being adapted for film, and will star John C Reilly and Joaquin Phoenix as the eponymous brothers. It has variously been described as a classic western, a picaresque novel, a dark thriller and 'cowboy noir'. DeWitt is Canadian, but currently resides in Oregon.



Library of Congress
"California Gold Diggers: A scene from actual life in the mines," a wood engraving in Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion, May 3, 1856.

"Charlie is too fond of the brandy, but his ambitions are mercenary and endless; Eli has a softer, flabbier side, yearns for a more settled existence, but it seems their twofold die is cast in blood." – Catherine Taylor, *The Telegraph*

"Our blood is the same, we just use it differently." – Eli, *The Sisters Brothers*

- How do you feel DeWitt explores the nature/nurture debate, and do you feel he draws any kind of conclusion?

"DeWitt is concerned with driving narrative, violence and (above all) the fraternal relationship [...] and the immutable characteristics of human nature." – Jake Wallis Simons, *The Independent*

- Do you agree that these were the primary concerns of the novel? What else might you add?

"The ancestor of all road movies and novels, the picaresque in its classic form is narrated by a rogue from the lower stations who, on his journey, rises through the classes as he encounters various typecast characters. It's a satirical genre that sends up not only such social types but the narrator himself, whose education consists of learning to adopt bourgeois hypocrisies." John Vernon, *The New York Times*

- Did you feel the picaresque form was used effectively in *The Sisters Brothers*? Do you feel there is another genre which categorises the novel better?
- In what ways does the novel explore the joys and challenges of masculinity, and what it means to be a man – both in 1850s America and in general?
- What does the backdrop of the California Gold Rush lend the novel, both as a thematic and a plot device?

The Golden Question

Do you consider *The Sisters Brothers* to be a typical Booker prize contender or an odd choice? Why? Considering the rest of the shortlist, should it have won?

