

The Son (Philipp Meyer)

Is this a cowboys and Indians story? I think so. That's a first for me. Obviously I'm not a proper man, or something.

The purpose of the book, if a novel can be said to have a purpose, is to prick the American conceit regarding "the Old West" (or "South" in this case). Gone is all trace of the white man as conquering loner, taming the wilderness by virtue of personal courage. Gone is all trace of the Indians as eco-saints living in harmony with nature. Instead the story of the Wild West (or South) which emerges is precisely that explained bluntly by one of the Comanches: you take land by killing the men that are there - just as they before them killed the previous occupants.

When an American man gets rich, the first thing he does is buy a ranch. They want to tap into the US 'creation myth'. All Americans seem to have this romantic notion of the old cowboys, driving vast herds of cattle over the plains and living poor but honest lives, close to the soil. Bollocks, we learn. Apart from anything else, this era of large scale ranching barely lasted more than a generation. And it was anything but sustainable. Colonel Eli himself recognised that his father's generation had permanently trashed grass lands which had taken forever to grow. In any case, even at their height, the ranchers were not the driving force of the economy. That honour, if such a term can be used of so morally corrupt an industry, goes to the cotton plantations. They still had slaves in Eli's day.

[Slavery persisted in Texas even after the Republic joined the United States in 1845. In fact about 30% of the Texan population were slaves at that time, slavery only being abolished when the Confederacy lost the civil war in 1865].

We are told the story of the multiple genocide of the Indian races. But it is told without raising the reader's sympathy for the Indians. Any likelihood of this is killed by the barbaric habits of the Comanches. The story opens with murder and rape, and continues periodically in the same vein. (Though tolerable once acclimatised, such stuff is a bit jarring if your last read was a Bronte).

The Mexicans fare no better in terms of the destruction of their reputation. They are the descendants of the Spanish Conquistadors who eliminated the indigenous inhabitants of Mexico - without even the saving grace of creating a thriving Mexican economy in their place.

The hero of the story, or rather anti-hero, is Colonel Eli - though it is many hundreds of pages before we learn why he is called 'colonel'. Eli *is* The Son - the first born in the new Republic of Texas. The new Republic was essentially white men stealing part of Mexico, which makes the treatment of Mexicans in Texas thereafter all the more egregious.

Eli spans the Indian era, the cowboy era and starts the oil era. A survivor of three years living as an Comanche, he never really ceases to be an Indian thereafter - or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he was always a savage anyway. Eli was a man of unerring good judgment. Odd that the dead shot, fearless fighting, cow-punching Eli had such good acumen when it came to anticipating the oil boom, wisely hanging onto land his neighbours sold too early and too cheap.

Eli embodies some sort of savage code of honour. Devoid of sentiment but not of affection, his first loyalty is to his fellow man, whether his band of Comanche braves or his band of Rangers. Women come second, and none higher in his affection than

Prairie Flower, his squaw wife at 16. But all men, women and children who stand in his way can be removed by murder.

The message is that such behaviour was not uncommon at the time, though Eli was better at it than most. His son, Peter, was of different stuff. Like Eli's brother, Martin, who did not care to survive with the Indians - Peter is introverted, educated and, above all, not enamoured of killing. He spends the whole novel in a Dostoevskian angst of guilt over his family's slaughter of their Mexican neighbours, the Garcias. Saving one of their daughters, Maria, from the killing, he eventually runs off with her - many, many years later - despite energetic and devious machinations by his wife, Sally, and Eli to prevent it.

The oil era, we discover, has hardly greater longevity than the cowboy era. By the time of Peter's grand-daughter, Jeannie, the real action has already moved to the Middle East. But it is the same mega-rich dynasties which operate there too. This includes Jeannie after the death of her father, Charles and, more significantly in terms of business, her other grandfather, Phineas. Jeannie is obliged to become a modern business woman, though reluctantly, and is ultimately respected though never accepted by the traditionalists. We fail to mourn her passing, fittingly at the hand - though accidentally - of a descendant of her grandfather, Peter, and Maria Garcia. So the Garcias get their revenge and Karma is satisfied.

I found the book rather bewildering to follow at first. Not only is the story told from the perspective of several different characters, and not only in several different time frames, but the time sequence is not continuous even for a given character. Did Meyer write each chapter on a piece of card and then shuffle them? Probably I'm just dim. But I did orientate myself in the end. Took me a while to distinguish between the chapters headed "Jeannie" and those headed "J.A.McCullough" though, seeing as how they are the same person. I cracked it eventually.

The end of the book goes back again to Eli's days as a ranger. We find him and his band killing the last of the free Lipan Indians - mostly women, children and the infirm - with no compunction whatsoever, using dynamite on their tipis. Just the one nine year old Indian boy left standing alone in the wilderness - though not, one presumes, for long.

Score: 80010