

Blu-Ray Review: Flawed Adaptation of ‘The Road’ is Paved With Good Intentions

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CHICAGO – Anyone who's read Cormac McCarthy's phenomenal 2006 novel, "The Road," has already, in a sense, seen the movie. McCarthy's deceptively simple, mesmerizing poetry produced such vivid and unforgettable images in the minds of his readers that a cinematic adaptation seems almost redundant.

The book's plot is more of a fable, centering on an unnamed father and son struggling to survive in a post-apocalyptic world. Their undying love for one another, as well as their shared belief in the good of humanity, is what prevents them from giving up. It's no surprise that this story has proven to have transcendent international appeal. The relationship between a book and its reader is a powerfully intimate one. Any reader who's ever been a parent or child won't be able to read McCarthy's book without seeing themselves as the characters. When you read "The Road," its story isn't happening to a handful of fictitious strangers. It's happening to you.



Blu-Ray Rating: **2.5/5.0**

One of the great challenges in adapting this material for the big screen is the fact that post-apocalyptic thrillers have recently become old hat. We've become well-accustomed to seeing lonesome human figures wandering through an eerily desolate landscape. Director John Hillcoat's adaptation of "The Road" had the added misfortunes of a long-delayed release date (which inspired negative expectations), and a murky marketing campaign that made the film seem like little more than a thinking man's "2012." But Hillcoat's flawed approach to the material proved to be an even bigger problem. He initially seemed to be the right man for the job, in light of his wonderful existential western, "The Proposition." Unfortunately, Hillcoat's gift for heightened melodrama is all wrong for "The Road." His most disastrous choice is the use of an intrusive score (by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis) that comforts the audience by telling them what to feel, signaling when danger is approaching or when safety has been reached. If this film teaches us anything, it's that the apocalypse should not be scored.



Viggo Mortensen stars in John Hillcoat's screen adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

What nearly saves the picture are the raw, unaffected performances by Viggo Mortensen and Kodi Smit-McPhee as the father and son, respectively. They are regrettably surrounded by an ensemble littered with distracting star cameos. Hillcoat's most notable achievement is his effective use of actual locations, such as New Orleans and Mount St. Helens. Gershon Ginsburg's art direction and Chris Kennedy's production design create a world drained of all color and life, as if the entire planet had been reduced to a dried autumn leaf. Yet the script by Joe Penhall has not mastered the intricacies and nuances of McCarthy's text, and opts for a straightforward storytelling approach that, for the most part, falls flat. By the time "The Road" reaches its conclusion, the moment carries none of the emotional weight that it did in the book, and comes off as anticlimactic. You know there's something wrong when the message of the movie is reduced to a bad laugh.



The Road was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on May 25th, 2010.

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

"The Road" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), and includes a Director's Commentary. Though Hillcoat admits right off the bat that he's "winging it," his commentary is of the standard informational variety, consisting of rambling yet sporadically engaging insights. Hillcoat consciously wanted to remind viewers of the "world we take for granted," in the film's serene opening scene (resembling the photography of William Eggleston), and during the end credits (which include the ambient sounds of our modern world). The director reveals how he had to delete some elements of the book in order to make his film more credible (such as the shopping trolley that the father pushes through the woods—a feat that would prove to be exceedingly difficult in real life). He also felt McCarthy's vision of the cannibal gangs in boiler suits would draw unwelcome comparisons to "Mad Max," and thus gave them a look closer to the killers in "Deliverance." Combining imagery of manmade and natural disasters, Hillcoat based his visual portrait of global destruction on the "apocalypse that we've seen in glimpses" (he points out how a particular smoke plume was meant to evoke 9/11). This was Hillcoat's first Hollywood production, and he says that he fought to include the novel's most controversial material. He defends his use of flashbacks, music and narration, and claims that the delayed release date was the result of extensive postproduction aiming to erase all the "signs of life" in his exterior footage. A joke onset was that the film needed to be finished "before it became a reality."

The BD-Live-enabled disc also includes a movielQ track and six minutes of forgettable deleted scenes that unfortunately don't include an alternate ending. There's also a rather insubstantial 13-minute making-of featurette that skims the surface of enticing subjects such as Mortensen's experimentation with Method acting. McCarthy is briefly seen visiting the set with his son, and young Smit-McPhee recalls how his tearful reaction to icy water ended up enhancing a key scene. The two theatrical trailers included on the disc acutely illustrate the difficulty in marketing this picture to the masses (one makes the film look like an edge-of-your-seat thriller, while the other focuses on the father/son dynamic).

'The Road' is released by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment and stars Viggo Mortensen, Kodi Smit-McPhee, Charlize Theron, Robert Duvall, Garret Dillahunt, Michael K. Williams, Molly Parker and Guy Pearce. It was written by Joe Penhall and directed by John Hillcoat. It was released on May 25th, 2010. It is rated R.

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