Sout hernes have a long history of going West, heeding Horace Greeley’s supposed 1865 call to “Go West, young man.” Huckleberry Finn plans to “light out for the Territory” at the end of Twain’s novel rather than be civilized. Robert Penn Warren writes a whole paragraph on it in All the King’s Men (1946) when his protagonist Jack Burden reminds us the West is “where you go when the land gives out and the old field pines encroach... it is where you go to grow up with the country.” And more recently, Doris Bett’s character Nancy heads West when a gunman kidnaps her and takes her on a strange internal and external journey in Heading West (1981).

So goes Charles Frazier’s protagonist in his latest novel The Trackers. Recovering from a near miss of a bad marriage, Valentine Welch is a young Virginia artist who finagles a WPA job painting a mural on a post office wall in Dawes, Wyoming. He is full of the romance of the West with its wide-open spaces and promises of freedom and grandeur. Val says the “journey to Wyoming felt epic and magnificent” (10), seeming like a good place to start. He is filled with idealism and wants to illustrate these feelings in his mural which he says is “going to express waves of history always swelling and cresting and breaking and rising again, and all the images will be slightly tilted forward, leaning into the future” (48). He calls his painting “The Trackers.”

Rather than stay in a small room in town, Val is invited to live with the local rancher named Long and his wife Eve. Long had been “formerly on the road with the railroad bums for a while before she started singing with dance bands” (29). Long has roped and tied her and they are living seemingly untouched by the Depression in a mansion described as “aggressively new” (3). Val becomes embroiled in their lives and Long begins to trust him — so much so that when Eve disappears, he asks Val to track her, find out what happened. He worries if she is still married to her first husband Jake, and hopefully bring her back to Long. Long has political ambitions, and a scandalous marriage could sink him.

Val’s journey west from Wyoming uncovers the real America of the 1930s, far away from the luxury of Long’s ranch. Val, while still holding a bankroll from Long, sees the America that won’t get painted on his mural. He visits camps of displaced Midwesterners right out of The Grapes of Wrath. He was squat-ters in mansions once owned by the wealthy who have now been evicted. He shows Eve’s picture all over “to people who represented the final expression of America’s fast three-century westward movement from the Outer Banks to here, jammed up against the end of the line, the last frontier” (105). Seattle, San Francisco – and even a quick trip to the California coast.

The subject of the book is ultimately movement and stories — much like Frazier’s masterpiece Cold Mountain, in which a man named Inman travels west to his home in the mountains, stopping to listen to stories of the people he meets on the way. Val is another Inman. People seem drawn to him, wanting to tell him their stories, unburdening themselves of sins of desperation because they can no longer run away. It’s about the need for movement, for being on the road. Even the cover shows a road heading somewhere unknown. Frazier asks what a nation in love with the road does when that road ends and we can no longer go west to escape our problems. Val muses, “When people come all the way across the continent and see the Pacific, they usually know for sure the road has ended, maybe in a way they hadn’t planned on, but that particular dream or fantasy of a new way forever from your problems is done. You can’t keep running west forever” (258).

When there is no more territory to light out for, a southerner has to face the truth: the West is not a place to reinvent yourself anymore. The West is not a peaceful refuge from bad choices: there is a “violence inherent in the concept of the West, the politically and culturally and religiously ordained incapacity smearing blood over all the fresh beauty” (319). That is what Val ultimately finds in the West — something missing in his mural of “hope and price, optimism and energy” (319). Frazier asks the oft-asked question: is the American Dream dead? Val concludes it never existed, that the wealthy “use those convenient dreams to mask lower classes flat and build personal fortunes on that foundation.” Otherwise “we ‘d end up with some nightmare of egalitarianism that would drag the hand-ful who run the country down to some frightening level of mediocrity” (147).

At the end of Cold Mountain, Frazier gives us an optimistic epilogue set ten years later, the remaining characters all happy and thriving, recovered from the grim and bloody Civil War — an ending that, to me, belies the brutality of the rest of the novel. Frazier gives us no such solace here. He sees an America full of “the brutal, ugly undertow of reality, the violence of the heart of the human animal, the glutony and greed.” The southerner returns home with a darker vision than of the America he painted on the mural in Dawes, WY.

1 Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884; Oxford UP 1996) 364. Robert Warren, All the King’s Men (Harcout Brace, 1946) 286.