

## WHERE THE ROAD ENDS

a review by Barbara Bennett

Charles Frazier. *The Trackers*. HarperCollins, 2023.

**BARBARA BENNETT** received her PhD in American Literature from Arizona State University. She is a Professor of English at NC State University. Her books include *Understanding Jill McCorkle* (University of South Carolina Press, 2000) and *Comic Visions, Female Voices: Contemporary Women Novelists and Southern Humor* (Louisiana State University Press, 1998). She is a frequent contributor to *NCLR*, including an interview with Lee Smith and Jill McCorkle in *NCLR* 2016, an essay on the adaptation of Daniel Wallace's *Big Fish* in *NCLR Online* 2019, an article on McCorkle's *Ferris Beach* in 2006, and frequent reviews.

**CHARLES FRAZIER** received critical acclaim for his debut novel, *Cold Mountain* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), which earned him the 1997 National Book Award and Sir Walter Raleigh Award. He also received the Raleigh Award in 2012 for his third novel, *Nightwoods* (Random House, 2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2013). *Varina* (HarperCollins, 2018; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019) received the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award, given by the Western North Carolina Historical Association. Read an essay on and a review of *Cold Mountain* in *NCLR* 1999, an essay by Frazier about the film adaptation of *Cold Mountain* in *NCLR* 2012, two interviews with Frazier in *NCLR* 2013, and an essay on the opera *Cold Mountain* in *NCLR* 2017.

Southerners 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."<sup>1</sup> And more recently, Doris Betts'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 over. 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 who was 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 went wrong, discover if she's still married to her first husband Jake, and hopefully bring her back to Long. Long has political ambitions, and a scandalous marriage would 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 visits squatters 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 but memorable trip back east to Florida by air to visit the family



COURTESY OF GREENSBORO LITERARY ORGANIZATION

of Jake, who rival anything out of James Dickey's *Deliverance*. The Southern Gothic comes alive for a section of the book that would be funny if it weren't so terrifying.

When he returns to the west coast and eventually finds Eve singing in a dingy bar, things get complicated fast. Jake is alive and well and tracking Eve as well in hopes of getting a payoff from Long back in Wyoming. Add to this Long's right hand man Faro, who's been enlisted to follow Val to make sure he's doing what he is supposed to. The trackers become the tracked, and again once over. With everyone chasing everyone else, chaos ensues with a final confrontation on a lonely road near 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 running away 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 rapacity 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 mash lower classes flat and build personal fortunes on that foundation." Otherwise "we'd end up with some nightmare of egalitarianism that would drag the handful 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 gluttony and greed."<sup>2</sup> Our southerner returns home with a darker vision than of the America he painted on the mural in Dawes, WY. ■

<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1884 (Oxford UP, 1996) 366; Robert Warren, *All the King's Men* (Harcourt Brace, 1946) 286.

ABOVE Charles Frazier being interviewed by Elaine Neil Orr at the Greensboro Bound Literary Festival celebrating the release of *The Trackers*, Greensboro, NC, 19 May 2023

<sup>2</sup> Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (Atlantic Monthly, 1997) 148.