



## **Red Sky in Morning**

**By Paul Lynch**

### **Reading Group Guide**

#### **The story of *Red Sky in Morning***

*Red Sky in Morning* came in a moment of revelation. I was doing that rare thing nowadays—watching television—when I stumbled upon a documentary. It told the story of a puzzling event that happened in Pennsylvania in 1832. In the spring of that year, fifty-seven Irishmen left Ireland for the United States. It is thought they were met at the Philadelphia docks by an Irish contractor with the name of

Duffy—an Irish name they could trust. He took them to a site thirty miles west of the city that had to be levelled for a rail line. Just a few weeks later, all fifty-seven of the men were dead. Their bodies were secretly buried. Their story was covered-up.

Now, see those men at Duffy's Cut. See them in the mud and the dirt, cutting and digging and carting earth for the railway. See their lives. Imagine where they came from. What they left behind. Now imagine them wiped off the face of the earth as if they never existed. This was what first took hold of my mind. I had grown up in the area where a lot of these men came from. I knew their names. I could hear how they talked, how they bantered with one another. I could see the whites of their eyes.

There is a line in Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* that I admire. It describes nicely what happened next. I started walking backwards from Duffy's Cut, "gazing at a point in the distance, but moving away from it, walking straight toward the unknown." I found myself in Donegal in the spring of 1832. A family man called Coll Coyle began whispering in my ear. The time and place were so different to my own, and yet he seemed to be so familiar. Coll was having similar problems to people around me, for I had begun writing the book in the spring of 2009, a time when the world economy was coming apart.

Coll Coyle, too, found his life being reshaped by great power, a force acting with impunity. He was about to lose everything he and his family had worked for and found himself powerless to stop it. But unlike the rest of us, Coll decided to try and do something about it. And so the book had a beginning.

So what's *Red Sky in Morning* about? Someone once said about *Moby Dick* that, when you start reading it, you think it is a story about a whale, until you realize it is a story about obsession, until you reach the end and realize it is about the abyss. As I wrote my novel, I found the book slipping from my grasp. What began as a story about a manhunt became a story about power, until it became a book about.... Well, I'll leave that up to yourself.

—Paul Lynch

## Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Coll Coyle flees when he sees John Faller questioning his brother, and this decision has enormous consequences. Do Coll's actions make him a coward? Or did he have no other choice? What does his behavior tell us about his character? Do you think you would choose similarly?
2. Weather and landscape combine powerfully in this novel and are almost characters in themselves. How does the author use them to help create the novel's atmosphere? What do you think is being expressed about the relationship between man and nature?
3. After Coll Coyle flees, his pregnant wife Sarah is left to fend for herself and her small child. What do we learn about her character from her first person narrations? As she tries to find out what happened to her husband, what does she come to understand about life?
4. John Faller may be the novel's most disturbing character. What do you think motivates him? Late in the book, he says, "every fate, every life, every story [is] swallowed by forces greater." What does he mean by this?
5. What is the role of language in the novel? Did you feel the poetic language contrasted with or complemented the often rough action and characters in the book? If so, how did this affect the emotional impact of the story?
6. Coll Coyle goes through several life-changing experiences in the novel. How does his character evolve as a result of these? Is he a different man at the end of the book than he was at the beginning?

**Paul Lynch's suggested reading for fans of *Red Sky in Morning***

*Pedro Paramo* by Juan Rulfo

*Opened Ground, Collected Poems* by Seamus Heaney

*Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy

*The Collected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Thomas Hardy

I have been a relentless reader from a tender age so the wellspring of influence lies deep and is often hard to source. Saying that, there were three writers who affected me deeply in the period before I wrote *Red Sky in Morning*. As a huge fan of the detached, behavioral style of French filmmaker Robert Bresson, I immediately recognized and adored that same quality when I first came to the work of Cormac McCarthy. Having grown a little tired of standard psychological realism, I felt an enormous kinship with his sensibility. McCarthy's post-Faulkner style and Hemingway-esque muscularity, alongside the mythic stature of his writing, were a powerful influence. If I was to name a key book it would be *Blood Meridian*.

I believe I have read the Mexican novel *Pedro Paramo* by writer Juan Rulfo some six or seven times and I still can't give you a plot summary. And while I have not absorbed that's book's magical realism, I have long obsessed over the mastery of Rulfo's storytelling and the precise beauty in which he renders the local landscape. I have absorbed from this book strange and unnamable qualities that work quietly under the radar of my writing.

Seamus Heaney's *Opened Ground, Poems 1966-1996* is a well-thumbed masterwork. What I adore of Heaney is "the coil and gleam" of the precise phrase, the unsettling yet laser-like intensity and beauty with which he renders the rural everyday of his native Co Derry—a county up the road from Co Donegal where I grew up. As an Irishman, my writing also enjoys an implicit license granted by generations of Irish writers who have bent without fear the English language into new shapes. I reserve a special place in my heart for James Joyce and confer honorary Irish nationality to the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins who died, while suitably miserable, in Ireland.

**Richard Lee talks with Paul Lynch about his debut *Red Sky in Morning***

*RL: You've been a film critic for some time. How do you think films inform your way of writing? Any specific film(s)?*

*PL: I have been a serious film watcher for a long time and that is bound to impact my writing. Way back when DW Griffith was figuring out how to make his first films, he went and read Dickens and learned how to construct a scene. We've come full circle and now writers are learning from cinema. Film teaches the writer how to get into a scene late and get out early. Perhaps, too, in no other art form has the value of storytelling been preserved so well—even among arthouse filmmakers.*

*I'm convinced there is an innate need for storytelling in people. The work of Nobel-prize winning cognitive psychologist Daniel Kahneman only confirms this is so. And while the modern novel and the postmodern novel abandoned at times that interest in storytelling, and atomized any idea of linear time, I am convinced the post-postmodern novel—whatever that is—can learn to reincorporate old-fashioned storytelling again.*

*A friend of mine pointed out that he could see flavours of Paul Thomas Anderson and Terrence Malick in my writing. Robert Bresson is very much an influence—I love his dispassionate, objective, spiritual style of filmmaking—it engages us to work a little harder.*

*RL: I described Sebastian Barry's *On Canaan's Side* as "The Historical Novel as a Paean of Loss." Do you think *Red Sky in Morning* is in the same vein?*

*PL: Loss is certainly a major theme of *Red Sky in Morning*. For me, there are two levels at work. There is the testimony of Sarah, the woman left behind, who tells of her search for meaning when there is none to be found, and her need to speak of her loss. She learns that "all you can do in this life is learn to accept loss." Her testimony in many respects is a paean to all loss, speaking out for the voiceless lost to that abyss. There is also a wider sense of loss at work too, the sense of man's movement through geological time and an indifferent nature, the continuing of the world after the book's characters have passed. That our own lives are only a white-hot moment.*

*RL: I read a review that described your style as “lyrical” and “sparse” and I think I agree with that, by turns. How do you choose when to be lyrical, when to be sparse?*

*PL: My writing is an intuitive act and any rationalization must come after that fact. I do have a strong sense though of when to intensify and when to draw back. There has to be a tight control of the lyrical mode as it is the route into the heart. A novel cannot be all heart or it will be dead on the page. Sentimentality has to be earned, and if used, used in tincture.*

Writing for me is an adventure—I sit to the screen and while I may have some schematic idea of what I need to do, I have no idea how I will get there. I slip into a word trance, follow what comes intuitively—first the ghost of an image, and then the words to describe it—the feel and texture and energy of words are my guiding light. What I look for in each sentence is an inevitability. You must pare and shape each sentence until it contains just that. A book is finished when the sentences run out of inevitability.

*RL: You say you wrote the Donegal landscape from memory. How did you feed the imagining of the voyage and the American scenes?*

*PL: I have been back to Donegal many times but I do prefer to imagine it. When I hold it in my mind, it becomes mythic. I want for my writing to operate on that realm of historical myth rather than historical detail. Then I can go to work, search out broader human truths. I tend to do little research as I find it tedious. This is just how my mind works. Of course, there has to be some research and there were a couple of essential sources I used for the voyage and American scenes to give me some grounding. But essentially, I made the rest of it up. I am guided by what is essentially human. Follow that and you cannot go wrong.*

*RL: Did you write the book linearly, knowing as you did its endpoint? The weight of that ending might have crushed the book. How did you guard against that happening?*

*PL: I do write linearly knowing the endpoint of a book, but you do not have to guard against it. When I write, I am so tight to the line, I am only in that space and time. For me, it is no different than how we*

live our own lives—there is a cognitive dissonance at work. When I did come to writing the end of *Red Sky in Morning*, it was a very moving experience. I wrote those last scenes in what felt like a trance, with the whole energy of the book's life force behind me. I was emotional, sad, and felt like I somehow experienced it. The key event was written on a train while travelling from San Sebastian to Madrid, through broad, flat countryside marked out by giant wind turbines. They looked suspiciously to me like Don Quixote's windmills. I kept thinking of Cervantes, the father of the novel and what I was doing.

*RL: I suspect this novel is going to be widely described as in an Irish literary tradition. Would you agree, and if you do, do you ever see yourself writing outside that tradition?*

*PL: I could not tell you if I am writing or not within a literary tradition. Though, perhaps, I am in tune with an ancient mode—the tragic worldview. And any astute reader of *Red Sky in Morning* will pick up its American Southern Gothic influences. I do feel that many Irish writers have often sounded like other Irish writers. I have never understood this. When I read, my taste is global. Three of the best books I have read in the past year were by Mo Yan, a Chinese writer, Mikhail Shishkin, a Russian, and László Krasznahorkai, a Hungarian. I have no interest in being perceived as an Irish writer, merely a writer. The world is now too small for such a thing. If my themes seem Irish, that is merely an interpretation. What I look for when I write is the universal.*

*RL: I'm interested in how the book cover changed between the proof and the published version—and how the U.S. cover is so different from the UK edition. Are there stories behind that?*

*PL: Not really. Essentially, the proof cover was different, I believe, because Quercus wanted to deliver the book with maximum impact. The Quercus cover leaps at you off the shelves. So too, the U.S. cover—though in feel it is very different. With the book coming out at a later date in the U.S., Little, Brown, I guess, wanted to put their stamp on it. The U.S. cover is gothic and beautiful and more in tune it seems to me with the tradition of American literary covers. I'm privileged to have two stunning pieces of artwork for the book.*

This interview originally appeared in slightly longer form on the website [historicalnovelsociety.org](http://historicalnovelsociety.org).  
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