

Graphic adaptations of two classic works

"Cormac McCarthy's The Road: A Graphic Novel Adaptation"

Manu Larcenet, Abrams Comicarts, 2024

"Peter Wohlleben's The Hidden Life of Trees: A Graphic Adaptation"

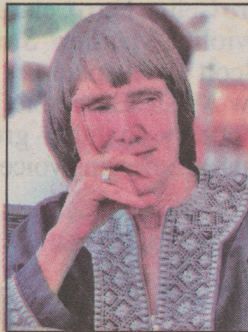
Fred Bernard and Benjamin Flao, David Warriner, translator. Greystone Books, 2024.

In the past few months, two classic works, Cormac McCarthy's novel "The Road" (2007) and Peter Wohlleben's scientific study "The Hidden Life of Trees" (2015), have reappeared in adapted graphic form. Readers, like audiences of movie versions of books, are often tempted to judge the merits of such books only on their fidelity to the original—a viewpoint based on expectations that adaptations merely present one art work in a different form. But like the finest movie versions of books, the best adaptive graphic novels remain faithful to their originals while maintaining independent artistic inspiration, and these two books display such extraordinarily imaginative art that they promise to become classics in their own genre.

McCarthy's "The Road" is a post-apocalyptic novel told in spare prose bare of punctuation, of a man and his young son, "each the other's world entire," who are following a road south through a ruined, ash-and-wind-filled landscape in hope of finding a place where they can survive the next winter. Larcenet's adaptive layout, with six to eight illustrations set squarely in most pages, all of them bare of the insets, expository passages, or narrational boxes familiar to graphic novel readers, conveys the mood of McCarthy's unadorned prose while focusing on the visual horrors of the journey. Close-up pen-and-ink drawings sometimes portray the father, but more often settle poignantly on the boy's face—perceptive, uncomplaining, compassionate, vulnerable, tearful, terrified—accentuated by tattered wrappings. Contrasting with these closeups are long-distance views of architectural beauty—a spectacular suspension bridge, a train bridge poised between two cliffs—that has unaccountably survived in a landscape of chaotically skewed telephone poles, looted gas stations, hopelessly leaning water towers, collapsed apartment buildings, and giant cranes. Like the seared world it

depicts, Larcenet's artwork is devoid of color—mostly black and white, with occasional sepia variation. Contrasting with that "everyday" bleakness are scenes, portrayed in a red overtone, that depict the human "bad guys" who dominate the hellish landscape—itinerate armies of thugs whose captured victims follow them in chains, and in one scene are imprisoned and kept for food. The horror, while present in both the original and the adaptation, tends to dominate Larcenet's adaptation more than it does in McCarthy's novel, partly because the father's desperately loving narrative voice is necessarily replaced by physical portrayals of his protectiveness. But the stark panels of Larcenet's adaptation convincingly convey the determination to remain "good guys" in a hellscape portrayed with artistic skill that is little short of spectacular.

Peter Wohlleben's "The Hidden Life of Trees" has become an internationally famous natural history study in the past 10 years, not only because of its portrayal of forests as social networks of caring individual trees, but because of Wohlleben's relaxed, friendly, and earnest scientific voice. One of the great achievements of Bernard and Flao's adaptation of the study is their preservation of that inviting voice as they portray 6-foot-6-inch Wohlleben striding in all seasons through beautifully-colored forests with his dog Max. The graphic layout is as inviting and casual as the "text": gorgeous full-page illustrations predominate, often illustrating the details Wohlleben wishes the reader to see. In other places, smaller panels continue the discussion almost by-the-by, as the illustrations follow the forest creatures, or portray the underground interactions of tree



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

and mycelium roots that draw nutrients to a single tree from over an acre of soil. Wohlleben, who manages a sustainable forest in Germany's Eifel Mountains, has given forest tours for years; this book is, essentially, an extension of those tours, accessible to readers of any age over 10, and certainly available to younger children who just want to look at the pictures.

Behind it is an undercurrent of urgency, for nobody understands the damage modern forestry (not to mention, modern civilization) is unthinkingly doing to forest networks that, left to themselves, gradually undo the damages of climate change. The work as a whole is uplifting and positive, and its readers will find their understanding of a walk in the woods will never be the same again.