

MEANJIN

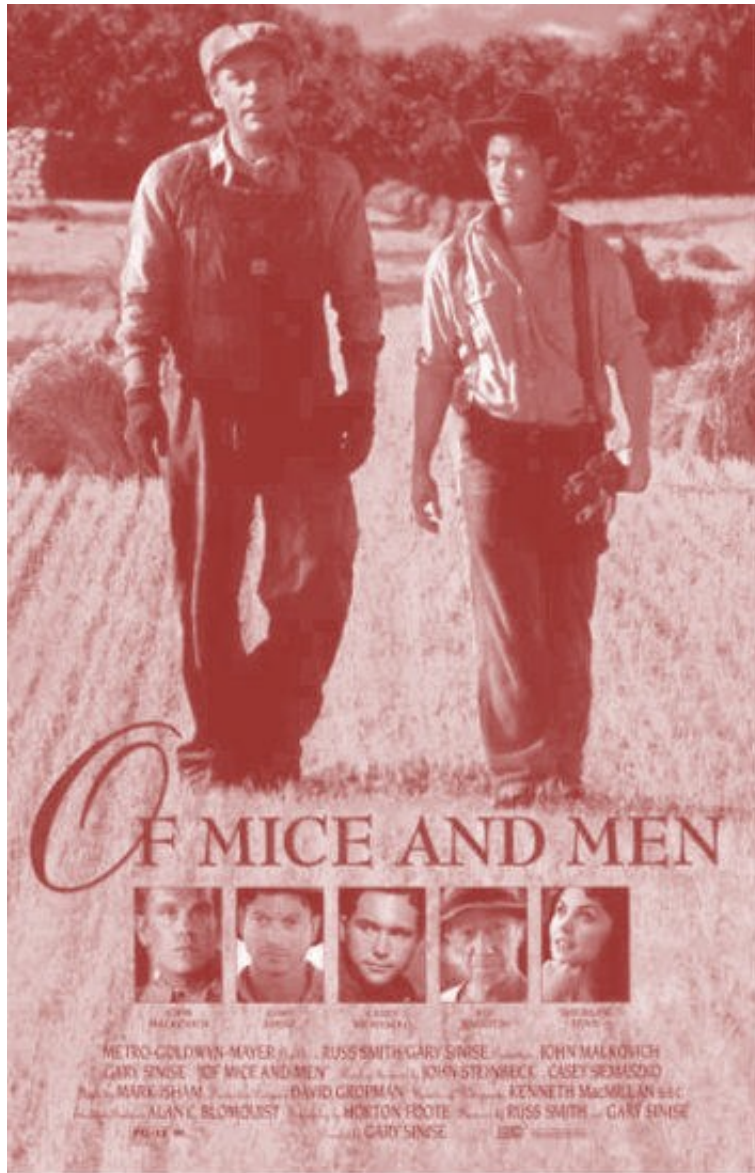


Where is the West?

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where is the west?

My host stood in the space in between the dark wood and glass partition that opened up from the middle and which when closed split the long living room of the art deco flat I was staying in in two her long frizzy brown hair was highlighted around the edges by the strong sunlight coming through an open window behind her thus ringing her head with a thin glowing golden halo but paradoxically her face was cast in shadow as the rest of the room was in shade for the high afternoon sun was steeply angling its light down to only form a light patch in a small area of this grand interior my host was holding the copy of *Meanjin* that I had brought with me from Australia and which I had read in countries such as El Salvador Nicaragua Guatemala Mexico Cuba and Ecuador the issue was called Where is the West? and mainly had articles about Aboriginal issues and on the orange front cover was a black and white photo of a young Aboriginal woman on a beach with some young indigenous children behind her and wearing a white singlet with the Aboriginal flag and a slogan that read WHITE AUSTRALIA HAS A BLACK HISTORY I had given the *Meanjin* as a memento that was from Australia as a thank you for my stay at this lovely flat the woman was appreciative and naturally enough due to the political nature of this literary magazine the previously light hearted conversation led to a discussion about the politics of Colombia and to what people had to deal with in their daily lives as a consequence of the ongoing civil war the woman suddenly looked at me seriously almost a little pensively and the shadow over her face was appropriate for this quick change in mood and while casually pointing a raised finger towards the window she remarked in a melancholy way that not far from where we now were on another Bogota street there had been a car bombing only in the last week



OF MICE AND MEN



JOHN MALKOVICH
CASEY SIEMASZKO
GARY SINISE
JOHN STEINBECK
CASEY SIEMASZKO

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PRESENTS A METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PRODUCTION
A GARY SINISE PRODUCTION "OF MICE AND MEN" WRITTEN BY JOHN STEINBECK AND DIRECTED BY RUSSELL SMITH
CASTING BY MARK SHAN COSTUME DESIGNER DAVID GROPMAN EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS KENNETH MACMILLAN AND C.
ALAN C. BLONQUIST PRODUCED BY ALAN C. BLONQUIST AND HORTON FOOTE BASED UPON THE NOVEL BY JOHN STEINBECK
SCREENPLAY BY GARY SINISE DIRECTED BY RUSSELL SMITH
DISTRIBUTED BY MGM
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of boys and motorcycles

With the two Bogota women who were putting me up in their flat for a few days I had gone to see John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* which starred John Malkovich and Gary Sinise as two wandering drifters looking for work during the Great Depression it spoke about injustice and prejudice as well as loyalty and friendship of human vulnerability and human cruelty by the time the movie ended it was very late when we started walking back home on the city streets along the way a man speeding on a motorcycle suddenly drove in front of us and went up a side alley where about half way along this dark narrow avenue a homeless boy was sleeping under a big piece of cardboard the motorcyclist ran over the cardboard and continued speeding off down the alley until it was swallowed up by the ghostly night I wanted to go up and see if the boy was still alive but my hosts said just look straight ahead and keep walking and so taking their local advice I did and the three of us mechanically and silently strutted to the flat which by now was not too far away I would learn it was a good chance the boy had been run over by a policeman in plain clothes who was one of many who believed that this was a good way of cleaning up the streets of all the so called human trash the women reasoned there was probably nothing they could have done for the poor boy and it was certainly best for their own safety not to get involved I could sense their fear



water of life

(John 4: 7-15).

In Bogota I walked pass a large church and decided to go inside it to marvel at its Renaissance quality and remember it was decorated with brown and black horizontal stripes on its rows of columns and up front I saw there was a Mass in progress so I stepped back into the shadows of the foyer so I would not be noticed I saw the parishioners having entered the church cross themselves and then dip a finger into the holy water in the font at the entrance of the church and then touch their foreheads with the water as I understand it the holy water is a symbol of eternal life which every true believer seeks I then saw a homeless boy with a hood over his head to help hide his face stealthily walk up to the font with its holy water and thinking no one was looking at him grab the font with both hands to better lever his head and bend his face down so as to dip his tongue into the font and lap up the water into his mouth like a cat at its water bowl thus for this boy the water was more than a symbol of life it was providing life itself to him I then saw the hooded boy return to the shadows amidst the pillars in the front of the church it was only then the boy looked over and saw me and he realized I had witnessed his personal life sustaining act in those world worn eyes whose whites could be clearly seen in the blackness there was a touch of fear that I would accuse him but I simply gave him a knowing look and smiled I hope it was seen as a signal of compassion after quickly glancing once more at the font I left the church after seeing what was for me a very concrete expression of a spiritual reality of love which went well beyond only the symbolic realm to what is real and blessed



Penguin Modern Classics

Alejo Carpentier
The Kingdom of This World



macandel

From Bogota I caught the bus to Quito on the night of the day my daypack was stolen by a thief dressed up as the bus driver I had given it to him as I sat down in my seat before I realised my mistake the thief in his impeccable neat disguise had run off never to be seen again along with my travel diary camera and all of my film all of it undeveloped all of it a record from the beginning of my trip in Central America and Cuba of the previous two months an act of magic realism in which I felt my soul had been stolen after having travelled non-stop by bus from Caracas to Bogota I was now not only very tired but also very depressed I saw that on this bus were young conscripts going to join the army and they took advantage of the disconsolate foreigner that was me by asking me to pay for some of the refreshments that we had at the stops along the way they were always laughing and finally they got off and I knew what they were doing but I also knew that ultimately I was better off than them for maybe in a few months they would be dead while I would be back in my safe country my better memory were the other passengers who expressed sympathy and in the first light of the next dawn I still remember the thin man with a thin moustache who stood up after pushing back his white wide brimmed hat smiling and pointing out to me for my sake a large extinct volcano he was a good man I think of Colombians as good people I think of the silent young negro also on the bus who I sat next to on that first night he only had one arm the other limb was a small stump perhaps a war injury I couldn't help but ironically think it was better to lose a part of my soul than a part of my body I also thought of Macandel who I had read about in the classic short novel *The Kingdom of the This World* written by the great Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier Macandel the negro Haitian revolutionary is said to have had only one arm at the time he was burnt at the stake by the French but it is believed he did not really die but turned into a butterfly and flew away before the final fiery consummation a heartening hopeful image of transformation to life from death for any individual or country now suffering or disfigured from injustice