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Pen Pals for 67 years...and counting

NICCI SHIPSTEAD
Clayton Pioneer

The schoolgirls thought nothing of it when their teachers asked if they would like to write to a student in another country. Six decades later, Barbara Lee Jackson and Mary Irwin chuckle together at the curiosity of their lengthy, long-distance written friendship.

At their third meeting at Jackson's home in Clayton, the ladies continue to make new discoveries about their parallel experiences. "It's like meeting a sister," says Irwin. "Yes, we have so many similar interests," agrees Jackson.

In the fall of 1940, in Wollongong, Australia, Irwin's 10th-year French teacher gave her three "pen friends." An English girl had "an unhappy love affair" and the connection was lost, while a French friendship disappeared during World War II. Irwin recalls the effects of the war, including rations for clothing and food. But with the novelties of youth such as dancing and swimming, she says, "the seriousness doesn't affect you."

In Long Beach, Jackson's 8th-grade English teacher proposed pen pals. "I was tickled that



Niccy Shipstead/Clayton Pioneer

BARBARA LEE JACKSON OF CLAYTON meets with her life-long pen pal Mary Irwin of Wollongong, Australia. More than a handful of decades the ladies have shared friendship through war, raising families, retirement, and death. Some years they only exchanged Christmas cards, now they have "graduated" to the internet.

Mother allowed it, because it cost 10 cents," Jackson notes. She was the only daughter with three brothers (same as Irwin) and it felt special to receive a luxury that was just for her.

Jackson's girlfriends chose pen pals in Norway and Germany, and she remembers that their letters were censored during World War II. "I cannot imagine what teenage girls wrote about that needed to be edited," says Jackson.

The women and their husbands met in 1990. Jackson, settling into retirement, traveled

with a tour group to Australia. The couples held similar interests, traveled up to the mountains and played golf.

Both have since been widowed, and Jackson is remarried to Bob Jackson. He joins the women in reminiscing. "It sounds like too much fun to miss," he explains.

Irwin joined the Jacksons this year to experience her first Thanksgiving and was pleased to find herself enjoying three dinners. She is just glad to be here, because she almost missed the airplane. "When I got to cus-

tombs, they asked for the address I would visit in the U.S. But since we have graduated to the cyberworld, that is the only address I could think of at the moment," says Irwin.

Luckily, a quick cell phone call got the street number and she processed through to make her flight.

Another tangle occurred because Irwin would be assessed a fine for missing an Australian vote, so the Jacksons brought her to San Francisco to find the consulate offices. After a long walk and meeting several well-intended guides, the group ended up across the street from where they started. The building entrance simply did not face the street.

Bob believes the United States should implement non-voting fines and apply the money toward the national debt. "It would clear up that problem quickly," he contends.

Between voting, dinners and billiards, there is time for a visit to the textile museum in San Jose. Jackson enjoyed her career as a home economics teacher and Irwin spins and weaves, "just for fun, it's a hobby really." Irwin presented hand-woven scarves for the Jacksons and their daughters.

— Movie Review —

The Coens are back, and they brought their Oscar clothes with them

"He'd kill you just for inconveniencing him," Carson Wells says regarding Anton Chigurh in "No Country for Old Men." Actor Woody Harrelson's line is

almost an understatement. Chigurh blows up a car simply to create a diversion while he steals morphine from a pharmacy.

Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin, making his fifth screen appearance of 2007) stumbles across a drug deal gone terribly wrong. Everyone seems to have killed everyone else, so naturally there's a suitcase full of money left behind. And like previous Coen protagonists, Moss takes it.

Moss doesn't make it through the day before his decision comes back to haunt him, literally. Now he's being hunted (or haunted if you like) by Javier Bardem's Chigurh, a ghost-like boogiemaniac of a character.

Tommy Lee Jones (who also appeared with Brolin in this year's "In The Valley of Elah") adds to this pitch-perfect cast as Sheriff Tom Bell. He stumbles onto the crime scene only after more gun-toting corpses have accumulated. Now he's hunting Chigurh, while trying to keep a missing Moss safe.

"No Country" contains some of the grizzliest violence the Coen brothers have put on screen to date. In spite of Roger Deacons' elegant cinematography, this is not an easy film to watch.

Often with the flip of a coin, Chigurh takes the lives of his victims without a hint of remorse,

or even thought. He seems to be more concerned with whether or not he got any blood on his boots. This is what makes him so unfathomably spooky.

Bardem's performance is a complete 180 from his wide-eyed, innocent portrayal of Florentino Ariza in the otherwise inert "Love In The Time of Cholera." I'm almost embar-



Javier Bardem stars in "No Country for Old Men."

assed to admit that "No Country" is my introduction to Bardem, but I will be keeping an eye out for what he does next (and I hope I'll never run into him in an elevator... or find him waiting for me in a hotel room).

"No Country" was adapted from Cormac McCarthy's novel and directed by Joel and Ethan



**JIM BRIGGS
AT THE MOVIES**

Coen (who share the collective alter ego of editor Roderick Jaynes). They've been in a slump so far this century, turning out mediocrity like "Intolerable Cruelty" and the remake of "The Ladykillers." "No Country" is about as good a comeback as we could have hoped for from the brothers who brought us " Fargo" and "The Big Lebowski."

You will not leave "No Country" feeling very good, in spite of its sense of humor. The film effectively makes the statement, whether you agree with it or not, that violence is random. It can happen to anyone at any time for any reason, though often for no reason at all.

When the Coens are at their best, they're better than almost anyone. "No Country" is not only one of the best films of the year so far, it's one of the best of the Coens so far.

Jim is a music teacher and freelance musician. He has a B.A. in Jazz Composition from the Berkeley College of Music and currently teaches the drumline at Clayton Valley High School.

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