

For readers entering “McCarthyia,” the journey can appear uncertain, formidable, even daunting. However, for most readers, it will prove fulfilling. Since only the 1990s, Cormac McCarthy has ascended sheer terrain. In the early part of the decade, he was a middle-aged, financially unsuccessful but award-winning “writer’s writer” with a cult following, one who had never sold more than a few thousand copies of his novels. Abruptly, he rose to inhabit heady spaces: He was at the top of best-seller lists, his books were being adapted to film, and he earned a reputation as one of the greatest American authors of his time.

When embarking on the quest to read and understand McCarthy’s work, it is best new readers be alerted to at least some of the swamps and other dangers that lie along McCarthian waysides, at their crossroads and crossings. Initially, such readers will do well to remember that McCarthy, who never finished college, comes about as close as possible in the hyperspecialized twenty-first century to being a Renaissance man, seemingly gifted in and knowledgeable about almost everything, from literature to speculative science, religions, languages, history, and philosophy, as well as about horses and stonemasonry. “Of all the subjects I’m interested in, it would be extremely difficult to find one that I wasn’t,” he told Richard Woodward in 1992, adding that the novel can “encompass all the various disciplines and interests of humanity” (“Cormac McCarthy’s” 30). “Everything’s interesting,” McCarthy later avers in the same interview (40).

On one hand, as Vereen M. Bell maintains in his book about McCarthy, published in 1988 and the first written about the author and his work, “With such a novelist, critical discourse is hard to get started” (xiii). On the other hand, since Bell’s book, McCarthy criticism has increased exponentially. Difficulty and expansiveness will likely confront most new readers of McCarthy. Consequently, readers often pose several questions when encountering McCarthy’s work for

the first time: Which of his books should one read first? In what order should one read his books? What should one know about McCarthy and his writings before beginning to read them?

The best answer to these questions is that it depends on the reader's own personality, interests, and desires. Some people may even find the road, at least as a whole, impassable: McCarthy's prose is dark and difficult. Nonetheless, at least several possible approaches merit recommendation and may be of aid to first-time readers.

The initial, and perhaps most obvious, approach is to read McCarthy's books by the date of publication, running from *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) to *The Road* (2006). Readers might also decide to read McCarthy's film script and two plays published during these years, or leave them until after finishing the novels. Taking this approach allows one to experience the works as McCarthy's career unfolds, as he matures and changes. This method, however, may prove difficult to many readers, especially those still at the high school or undergraduate levels, in particular both because the majority of his most disturbing material comes from early in his career and because his style simplifies both in diction and syntax with the later writings. Also, McCarthy often worked on material for many years before it reached publication, sometimes publishing newer work before novels he began a decade or two prior.

Perhaps the best route for first-time McCarthy readers would be to start with either *No Country for Old Men* (2005) or *The Road*, and then read the other of the two before reading others. A different approach might be to begin with the "Westerns," reading them chronologically by publication, then looping back to the "Southern"; however, this approach leaves readers with the difficult task of beginning with *Blood Meridian* (1985), likely his greatest, most complex, and difficult book to date. A variation on this approach begins with *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) then moves on to the other two volumes of the Border Trilogy. However, this track leaves readers facing *The Crossing* (1994) second,

perhaps the most philosophically oriented and densest (though most rewarding) of his writings.

Then again, if one intends to read only one or two of McCarthy's books, that intent essentially changes everything. Most of these readers will opt for *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road*, both, or perhaps *Blood Meridian* only. However, as noted McCarthy critic Edwin T. Arnold has argued in two important essays—"The Mosaic of McCarthy's Fiction" and "The Mosaic of McCarthy's Fiction, Continued"—substantial, often sophisticated and nuanced mortaring connects the "story stones" McCarthy has "masoned" together. As such, McCarthy's work is written to be read (and reread), and is best read, as a whole. Each work informs the others—and informs both American and world literature. As McCarthy has said, "The ugly fact is books are made out of books. The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written" ("Cormac McCarthy's" 31). As the mysterious former Mormon priest tells Billy Parham in *The Crossing*:

[T]here is only one story to tell. . . .

[T]here is but one world and everything that is imaginable is necessary to it. For this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them. . . . Rightly heard all tales are one. (142–43)

McCarthy's implicit arguments are Platonic, mystical: All is ultimately "united," as part of a "Great One."

A logical connection to the question of how to approach reading McCarthy involves what criticism and other secondary material to read first. This volume is one such work. Its bibliography assists greatly with this process. One would probably be best advised to begin that exploration with its articles, which include the most significant of McCarthy's interviews and some foundational reviews and essays

about his work. Many of the books listed in the bibliography, especially compilations, serve as departure points.

Content is a second major concern for readers in wending McCarthy's dark roads and trails. *Blood Meridian* has been described as "devastating." Meant as praise, it is a term that works well for all of McCarthy's work, summing up why his books prove difficult for many readers. In fact, leading critic Harold Bloom, with his usual bombast, reveals in the introduction to *Blood Meridian*'s Modern Library edition that he "failed" in his first two attempts to read that novel "because I flinched from the overwhelming carnage" (v). Bloom identifies Judge Holden as "the most frightening figure in all of American literature." In the introduction, he adds, "many of my students resist it initially" (vi). Nonetheless, Bloom also ranks it "the ultimate Western, not to be surpassed" (v) and "the single greatest book since [William] Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*." He places McCarthy—along with Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and Philip Roth—among four living great American novelists he says have "touched . . . the sublime" ("Harold Bloom on *Blood Meridian*").

Citing the controversial Bloom, however, is intended less to praise his judgments about McCarthy's writings than to illustrate at once the difficulties and rewards inherent in reading McCarthy. These extremes prove inseparable, parts of the same experiential continent. They lead to the following point: Great writers demand all readers learn, even relearn, to read each such writer every time they open a book. Stating it differently, readers must encounter and enter (or reenter) an author's own unique world, and leave the "real world" for it.

Once this principle is noted, McCarthy's content poses the greatest obstacle for the majority of readers attempting to enter his world. McCarthia is indeed dark and disturbing. One defining trait of McCarthy's world is its frequent detailing of violence and death. Woodward observes that the writer "isn't sure what attracts him to the theme of violence, although he regards as 'not serious' writers who don't address the issue of death" ("Cormac Country" 103). To David

Kushner, McCarthy explains, “If I wrote about violence in an exaggerated way, it was looking at a future that I imagined would be a lot more violent” (48). In short, McCarthy, like all great writers, also sees his writing as the act of a prophet. Though that includes the sense of prophecy connecting to the future, its primary emphasis is on calling society to account for its present and where that seems to be leading. It entails an artist’s responsibility to be truthful within his or her vision. This all said, his violent content is best considered through two major components that work hand in hand: his characters and subject matter.

Three examples can illustrate just how difficult McCarthy’s characters and content can prove for readers. *Child of God* (1973), his third novel, features a murderous necrophiliac as its main character and graphically describes a number of his ghoulish practices, primarily sexual. Perhaps most shocking to many readers, however, will be McCarthy’s early warning that main character Lester Ballard is “A Child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4)—which McCarthy makes readers feel, maybe even believe, at some levels.

McCarthy’s fifth novel and first Western, *Blood Meridian*, is one of his darkest and most violent, and one description of what is encountered by the scalp-hunting party featured in the text serves particularly well to illustrate how difficult McCarthian content can be:

The way narrowed through rocks and by and by they came to a bush that was hung with dead babies. . . . These small victims, seven, eight of them, had holes punched in their underjaws and were hung so by their throats from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky. Bald and pale and bloated, larval to some unreckonable being. (57)

Readers must enter such horrific scenes in almost all of McCarthy’s books. Moreover, even *The Road*, much ballyhooed by none less than Oprah Winfrey, contains a scene resonating with the one above, severe enough that it was left out of the film. The father watches four people below, “Three men and a woman. The woman walked with a waddling

gait and as she approached he could see that she was pregnant” (164). The next day the father and son discover the group’s campsite:

They’d taken everything with them except whatever black thing was skewed over the coals. . . . [T]he boy turned and buried his face against him. . . . He turned and looked again. What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. (167)

It serves no good purpose for any reader to enter McCarthyia without knowing that it holds such horrors. Consequently, McCarthy’s critics (particularly those that offer negative critiques) frequently overemphasize his books’ violence. Overall, however, the books transcend the dark and disturbing, and a multitude of other themes constitute his literary landscape. Other themes include many examples of human kindness: friendship, the generosity of Mexican peasants, personal independence and responsibility to the point of principled anarchism, the joys of food and drink, the love of men for women, the love of fathers for sons, and codes of right conduct despite the outcome. In the end, McCarthyia proves a world of variety, range, depth, and nuance.

The writer’s style, or styles, is a third crucial consideration that creates difficulty for McCarthy readers. “The style comes out of the place, material, characters, etc.,” he wrote John Ditsky (11). In part, these words indicate McCarthy strives to produce art. They also indicate part of his artistic credo incorporates the principle of organicism, in this sense at least somewhat akin to Edgar Allan Poe’s claims that a short story should work to “a single unified effect”: All of a story’s components should work together. For McCarthy, one major component of his work is his writing style, on which critics surprisingly rarely comment. (Terri Witek’s “He’s Hell When He’s Well” in Rick Wallach’s *Myth, Legend, Dust* [2000] offers one notable exception.) However, McCarthy’s style, likely the first of his distinctive writing traits readers will notice, also may prove the initial barrier readers must overcome.

Language is an aspect of McCarthy's style that offers a departure point and merits deeper attention than it usually receives. He has a traditional, and nonetheless trademark, practice of intermixing formal linguistic registers with colloquial and vernacular ones. As for the traditional end of this spectrum, his practice of fusing "high style" and "low style" is seen in the literature of many greats, including Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare in the English tradition. Mark Twain and Faulkner lead the way among the legions of American authors who employ this technique.

McCarthy's diction, both in narrators' voices and characters' dialogue, proves difficult for readers at both ends of the formal-informal continuum. McCarthy seems never to have encountered a word on which he would give up. More often than not, however, even perhaps universally, in his work, even the most unfamiliar word not only is used exactly but also demonstrates itself to be the only word that carries its exact meaning. Arcane, archaic, even ornate diction is frequent throughout his writing, especially the first six novels (most richly in *Suttree* [1979] and *Blood Meridian*). As McCarthy's alter ego, drunken Cornelius Suttree, kneels and then surveys the Church of the Immaculate Conception, he sees these images:

Beyond the chancel gate three garish altars rose like gothic wedding cakes in carven marble. Crocketed and gargoyled, the steeples iced with marble frogs ascending. Here a sallow plaster Christ. Agonized beneath his muricate crown. Spiked palms and riven belly, there beneath the stark ribs the cleanlipped spearwound. His caved haunches loosely girdled, feet crossed and fastened by a single nail. To the left his mother. Mater alchimia in sky-blue robes, she treads a snake with her chipped and naked feet. Before her on the altar gutter two small licks of flame in burgundy lampions. (253)

The unfamiliar archaic terms, such as "crocketed," "muricate," "mater," "alchimia," and "lampions" conjoin with unorthodoxly combined coinages, such as "skyblue," the paired "cleanlipped spearwound," and

the noun-turned-adjective “gargoyled” to produce a world of unfamiliarity, of seeming antiquity, mysteriously timeless, medieval, and oppressive. The past intrudes on the present.

Some of McCarthy’s characters also speak formally, including *Blood Meridian*’s Judge Holden. An example is when he speaks to a military lieutenant who has accused the scalp hunter’s ostensible leader, Glanton, of murder:

Kindly address your remarks to me. . . . I represent Captain Glanton in all legal matters. I think that you should know first of all that the captain does not propose to be called a liar and I would think twice before I involved myself with him in an affair of honor. Secondly I have been with him all day and I can assure you that neither he nor any of his men have ever set foot in the premises to which you allude. (237)

Though a single example of Holden’s speech, it is an exemplary one. Representing a relatively formal Victorian style of speech, that of an educated person, and even legalese, Holden’s speech, in the example and elsewhere, serves both to deceive and to impress (the two are hardly mutually exclusive), and it stands in stark opposition to the rag-tag speech of the scalp hunters and most other characters in the novel. Additionally, Holden’s speech allows him to assume an air of authority. Finally, it serves to put Holden on the same level as the narrator, causing the audience to wonder whether Holden is a foil for the narrator or his speech is intended to indicate the narrator’s own unreliability.

In contrast, McCarthy’s heavy use of slang, particularly in dialogue, confuses readers at times. For example, he uses the term “boar’s tush” in *No Country for Old Men*. A number of readers first thought the phrase a spelling error, however humorous. Actually, “tush” is slang for “tusk,” so its use is no error. Doubtless some Southern and southwestern readers will understand such slang better than people from other regions and countries. At any rate, the richness of both formal and in-

formal language appeals to McCarthy; in fact, the richness of language functions as a theme, one presenting itself indirectly through his style.

In addition to colloquial vagaries in McCarthy's dialogue, with *Blood Meridian*, he began employing a good deal of speech in Spanish. This practice continues through the Border Trilogy and *No Country for Old Men*. In part, it seems to be an effort to replicate the border experience and to defamiliarize, even disorient, readers, much as if they are directly experiencing the border and Mexico. The use of Spanish adds to the mysteriousness of McCarthy's tone or atmosphere (as does his content). Often the context—a reply in English or the narrator's voice reentering the passage before, after, or within the Spanish—assists readers with the meaning. Just as readers of McCarthy might want to have access to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, readers nonfluent in Spanish need a good Spanish dictionary. Even so, one should be aware that McCarthy loves slang in Spanish as much as in English; furthermore, he often uses the dialect of Spanish spoken near the border. Therefore, at times, the Internet provides a good source for unraveling the meaning of Spanish words, phrases, and lines.

A last element of McCarthy's diction readers will likely notice consists of the verbal motifs he employs within and across his books. McCarthy's most famous phrase, judging by the Cormac McCarthy Forums and any number of articles about the writer and his work, is "They rode on," a constant refrain in *Blood Meridian* that continues through the entire Border Trilogy and makes infrequent appearances in *No Country for Old Men*. However, the phrase is anticipated in *Suttree* when the narrator says of the lead character, "He rowed on" (11). *The Road* mutates this phrase into "they went on" and also assumes repeated use of "Let's go," a verbal motif from Sam Peckinpah's classic Western film *The Wild Bunch* (1969), a possible influence on and a definite parallel to McCarthy's own "They rode on." In any case, all of these phrases appear to signify an existential reality: the imperative of carrying on in life regardless of outcomes.

Another verbal motif runs throughout *The Road*. At times bothersome, however realistic, the phrase “okay”—often used several times on a given page in dialogue between the father and the son—serves a vital function similar to “they rode on” and its variants. The boy and his father rarely, if ever, are truly well or fine. Even their time in the underground shelter, where they have plenty of provisions, is fraught with potential danger. However, the boy, for all his suffering, never really has known any other world, born as he was after the disaster. The father once knew a drastically different world, so he suffers more profoundly. Nonetheless, he too is “okay” because his son is in fact “his warrant” (4) and because “each [is] the other’s world entire” (5). As the novel states it, “If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same” (152).

Fittingly, McCarthy’s syntax fits hand in fist with his diction. Again, he fuses elements of high and low style. Many of his sentences are extremely long, sometimes Faulknerian in length. Along with heightened diction, long sentences are particularly evident in his first seven or eight novels. In fact, it is as if he has reversed Ernest Hemingway’s professed pattern. Whereas Hemingway sought to “perfect” short and simple sentences before embarking on long, complex ones, McCarthy began with what, other than his vernacular dialogue, represented a high sentence style. The baroque element dominates his midcareer novels *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*. *Suttree*, in particular, flows with medieval sentencings, suggesting a profound link between the Dark Ages and twentieth-century America. The baroque style also permeates *The Orchard Keeper*, *The Crossing*, and the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain* (1998). It is a real presence in *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God*, and *All the Pretty Horses*.

Over the years, McCarthy’s prose has grown leaner in both diction and syntax for reasons beyond a mere change in style. After all, Hemingway’s spare style can be and has been seen as reflecting the emptiness of his times, the period after World War I. Moreover, McCarthy has neither completely abandoned strange, obtuse words

nor become so lean stylistically as to follow Hemingway's lead of using vague all-purpose terms. McCarthy's diction remains precise, and his descriptions are far more exact than Hemingway's brand of minimalism. Consequently, McCarthy seems likely to have altered his style at least in part to reflect what Hemingway achieved in his earlier style: a world empty of meaning and richness and devolving into a dehumanized wasteland, drained of significance as time and history pass. It is as if the world itself is winding down, approaching destruction, whether for a Hindi or Christian renewal or for mere annihilation.

Another distinguishing element of McCarthy's style that creates difficulty for many readers is his constant use of sentence fragments. Many of these fragments form long sentences, and many others function as part of a chain of fragments. McCarthy uses them sharply and clearly, especially within their context. However, readers take time to adjust to their frequency, to sense their rhythms, and to keep connected to their subjects and lines of thought. As with all of McCarthy's tools and quirks, the widespread use of fragments carries meaning in itself. Much of life appears fragmentary; at the same time, however, the fragments connect to whatever preceded. McCarthy's own words to Garry Wallace support such a claim, since all features of his writing relate to the sum he proclaims:

"Truth," McCarthy said when asked about what writers must accomplish in their writing.

"But what exactly is truth?" I asked.

"Truth," he repeated, his implications tacit. (138)

This exchange is strikingly akin to John 18:37–38, in which Jesus's brief words about truth are followed by Pilate's question, "What is truth?" After the query, Jesus remains silent—the "implications tacit." An unspoken "My words" serves as Jesus's reply; in essence, that is the same meaning carried by McCarthy's repetition of "truth": his words, his writing, taken as a whole—style, form, and content. McCarthy's

second wife, Anne DeLisle, notes that he stressed to her that “everything he had to say was there on the page” (Woodward, “Cormac McCarthy’s” 30).

Possibly the most readily noticeable trait of his writing, McCarthy’s idiosyncratic punctuation fits perfectly with his other unique stylistics. He rarely uses punctuation other than commas, periods, question marks, and occasional apostrophes, and he uses commas as infrequently as possible. He never uses quotation marks, exclamation points, or semicolons, holding the last in particular contempt, terming their use “idiocy” (Woodward, “Cormac Country” 103). He rarely uses colons and avoids apostrophes for the majority of his contractions. In essence, he uses apostrophes with contractions only when he must, as in “she’s.” Especially early in his career, he often did not capitalize the first letter of certain nouns such as “spanish,” “indian(s),” “bible,” or “god.” During a televised *Oprah* interview, McCarthy claims, “You shouldn’t block the page up with weird little marks. If you write properly, you shouldn’t have to punctuate” (for some reason, this material did not make it into the show’s transcript). A number of other authors, however, including many modern ones preceding McCarthy (and several in apparent impersonation of him), have followed one or more such practices, particularly avoiding quotation marks. Again, these practices work with the others to create both mystery and unity. The lack of quotation marks especially serves to underscore that speech is another action, indistinct from others.

McCarthy’s ambiguity forms a fourth important diversion for readers. In the tradition of his favorite literary forebears, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, McCarthy revels in ambiguities. This trait emerges at various points and in varying frequencies throughout his stories, whether novels or plays. The significance of ambiguity is most profound at the end of works (or in the case of the Border Trilogy, at the end of the series). Ambiguity expresses yet another part of the mystery of existence. Curiously, it always allows for, or provides, a type of closure. However the closure must be termed, paradoxically, an

“open closure”; because of its ambiguity, it makes any ending’s possible “meaning” or “truth” multiple, at least potentially. Therefore, a resolute ending is always present in McCarthy, but its exact meaning remains unclear, suggestive. The ambiguity seems a sort of fictional incarnation of truth. For all the “truth” in McCarthy’s world, perhaps the greatest is the uncertainty of its meaning, the multiple and even paradoxical possibilities of meaning it carries, all, none, or some of which may or may not be “true.”

Compounding the ambiguity is that, in some cases, McCarthy’s endings, and not just their interpretations, are multiple. The finale of *The Road* illustrates both McCarthy’s ambiguity and his use of multiple endings. Initially, the “sad” ending of the father’s death occurs (236); this is followed by the gradual (and qualified and ambiguous) “happy” ending: the boy’s incorporation into a new family (237–41). The fairy-tale tone and language of the latter sequences are further offset and made increasingly ambiguous by the third ending. Save for the motif of trout, the final ending seems disconnected from the rest of the book, changing the focus from a tale of human survival to one of what the trout represents: everything lost that was “older than man.” However, even this devastating sense of loss is itself made contextually affirmative: While existing, “all things . . . hummed of mystery” (241).

In McCarthy’s ambiguous endings—and in his other ambiguities—readers encounter the mystery of existence. The characters and their acts, nature and its “(f)acts,” occurrences and their facts, the numerous intertextual references in his own books and with others’ books, the stylistic elements and rhythms, and all else inhabiting McCarthy’s milieu all seem to work cohesively to mold this mystery.

The four demanding traits of McCarthy’s writing are not necessarily all the mysteries one will encounter while wrestling with this literary demigod, nor does their coverage in this introduction, or this entire book, approach totality. After all, McCarthy is also a master of various and often layered and veiled puns, jokes (often inside ones), and allusions. Nonetheless, this introduction should equip readers with

necessary tools and knowledge, including maps of a sort, to begin negotiating or to better traverse the tough terrain and topography of McCarthy's oeuvre. It should help enrich the experience of reading an author who dares battle with the elite who have preceded him.

Regarding McCarthy, then, all of these major difficulties, along with numerous others, are integral to his vision of the world and, thus, to his art. Indeed McCarthy's entire world bleeds into "one," the premise with which this volume closes. McCarthy makes hard and dark demands on his readers. "Don't ever treat your audience as if they're stupid," he told one acquaintance. "Your reader is smart" (Wallace 137). McCarthy certainly asks a great deal of readers, but he is an author who honors those in his audience—and rewards them—according to how they labor at reading and trying to understand his words.

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