

Cormac McCarthy (1933-2023): Chronicler of American carnage

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Cormac McCarthy, celebrated American fiction writer, died June 13 at his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, at the age of 89. Over the course of a 60-year career, McCarthy was best known as a novelist who achieved fame relatively late in his career with works like *Blood Meridian* (1985), *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006).

McCarthy's death has led to an outpouring of praise for his work in the corporate media. A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* praised McCarthy for "redefining American prose" and placed him on a par with Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison and Philip Roth. CNN's Dakin Andone called McCarthy "among America's greatest authors." In a March 2023 article published before McCarthy's death, the *Nation* managed to compare him to Aeschylus, Euripides, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Bach, Mozart and Thomas Mann.

Cormac McCarthy is a writer whose undeniable artistic abilities were fatally undermined by both the pessimistic, ahistorical and irrationalist ideological concepts that dominate his work and by the generally reactionary political and cultural climate in which he ultimately rose to fame.

While McCarthy genuinely attempted to develop the styles of writers like William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, his works are so permeated with misanthropy and a hostility to human progress that his literary output represents a step back from the great American writers of the 20th century. Faulkner declared "man will not only endure, he will persevere" and Hemingway began *For Whom The Bell Tolls* with Donne's "no man is an island," but McCarthy told the *New York Times* in 1992:

"There's no such thing as life without bloodshed. I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous."

Great works of art cannot come from ideas as false and shallow as these. They do not make possible a genuinely realistic and deep-going grasp of life. Though McCarthy personally struggled financially for much of his career and never wrote simply for a paycheck, his work gave expression to the outlook of an affluent and complacent social layer in the stagnant cultural desert of the 1980s and '90s.

McCarthy was born in Providence, Rhode Island in July 1933. The son of a prominent New Deal attorney, he moved with his family to Knoxville, Tennessee in 1937 where his father represented the Tennessee Valley Authority, the largest public works program in American history. McCarthy briefly attended the University of Tennessee in the early 1950s before dropping out and joining the Air Force. He was stationed in Alaska, then a US territory and critical Arctic outpost in the Cold War against the Soviet Union, and it was during his tour there that he "read a lot of books very quickly," he later recalled, apparently to combat the routine and boredom of military life.

In the post-war period, the American state and ruling class created a toxic anti-communist environment and attempted to purge socialist and left-wing views from film, writing and culture as a whole. Under these conditions, artists and writers became vulnerable to irrationalist "explanations" for the horrors of World War Two, fascism and the Holocaust. Books such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), which also presents violence and atavism as central to the human condition, convey the attitudes dominant in certain circles during this period.

McCarthy published his first novel at the age of 32, while he was working in an auto parts plant outside Chicago. From the beginning of his writing career, McCarthy placed disturbing tales of bloodthirsty violence at the center of his efforts.

The Orchard Keeper (1965) deals with the aftermath of the strangling murder of a hitchhiker and focuses on the theme of vengeance. *Outer Dark* (1968) involves a baby born out of an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister and draws its title from the Gospel of Matthew, "The children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God* (1973), tells the story of a homeless man who becomes a serial killer and necrophiliac, storing his victims' bodies in a cave.

McCarthy's presentation of violence is often gratuitous and not developed from the standpoint of critiquing the social conditions that give rise to criminality and conflict. To the extent he criticizes society, it is from the point of view of presenting humanity as a whole as inherently violent. Describing the homicidal main character in *Child of God*, McCarthy once said in an interview, "There are people like him all around us," as if to say: this is more or less what mankind truly amounts to.

In another passage in *Child of God*, McCarthy describes all of humanity as driven by violent, anti-social impulses: "See him," he writes of the killer-protagonist. "You could say that he's sustained by his fellow men, like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him. A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it."

McCarthy's novels of the 1980s and early 1990s maintained these themes, even as the setting moves from the hardscrabble towns of Appalachia to the beautiful, barren landscapes of the American Southwest.

Blood Meridian, written in 1985, is McCarthy's semi-historical account of the Glanton Gang, a gang of Texas slaveholders who carried out horrific massacres of the Native peoples of the Southwest in the late 1840s at the behest of Mexican and American authorities and claimed bounties on indigenous scalps.

McCarthy's selection of the Glanton Gang for subject matter is one-sided and superficial. He writes of the Glanton Gang not to draw attention to the reactionary character of Texan independence and its connections to slavery, or to the US invasion of Mexico, but to present American history as nothing but a long string of senselessly violent, even sociopathic acts.

The late 1840s were not only a period of pro-slavery slaughter, they were also marked by the emergence of a popular movement fighting for the abolition of slavery and witnessed heroic sacrifices in the struggle to free the slaves.

The “American Renaissance,” associated with figures such as Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson, Stowe and Whitman, along with towering abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass, not to mention Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant, began its flowering during these years, the intellectual preparation for the earthshaking Civil War. Why does McCarthy choose only the most appalling aspects of American history, and then make so little of them?

He undoubtedly did capture something of the ruthless and brutal character of Westward expansion, especially in the character of Judge Holden, who Harold Bloom called “the most frightening figure in all of American literature.” In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy has Judge Holden say:

“It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way.”

Though one must always be cautious about identifying an author’s views with those of a protagonist, in this case Holden’s notions are clearly not so far from McCarthy’s own, which he expressed on numerous occasions, and the passage reads not as a criticism of the judge’s sentiments but as an endorsement. Through Judge Holden, violence and war are presented as the guiding forces of human history. But this is a deeply false conception, and when McCarthy forces his characters into such retrograde schemas, they fail to become “real” in an artistic, historical and psychological sense and instead feel contrived and ideologically driven.

In his 1992 novel *All the Pretty Horses*—the novel which first introduced McCarthy to a mass audience—McCarthy writes that humanity’s miserable state of violence is inevitable and pointless to oppose:

“We weep over the might have been, but there is no might have been. There never was. It is supposed to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I don’t believe knowing can save us. What is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God — who knows all that can be known — seems powerless to change.”

With these sentiments McCarthy was drawing from and tapping into attitudes growing in strength within official political and intellectual life. It is not McCarthy’s fault that he rose to fame in the era of Reagan and Thatcher, but it is not accidental either. McCarthy’s work was a means by which a retreating, disoriented intelligentsia introduced into fiction Thatcher’s aphorism that “there is no society” and Fukuyama’s proclamation of “the end of history.”

In this regard, it is worth noting that American novelist Philip Roth, who, like McCarthy, was also born in 1933, acquired a popular audience in the 1960s and ‘70s, while McCarthy remained relatively marginalized at the time, only gaining broader public recognition and approbation in the late 1980s and especially the early 1990s. Roth’s writing, which is much more humane, sympathetic and historically oriented, tapped into broader democratic moods of the time, while McCarthy emerged to prominence in a period of general political reaction.

McCarthy’s profile grew after the publication of his 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men*, which sold widely and was adapted for the screen by the Coen brothers. The *World Socialist Web Site* reviewed the film in a 2007 article, “The banality of evil: No Country for Old Men.”

But it was McCarthy’s 2006 novel, *The Road*, which won the strongest accolades. *The Road* is a post-apocalyptic story of a father and son traveling through a wasteland ruined by either nuclear war, environmental

disaster or some other universal catastrophe. The book was featured on Oprah Winfrey’s book club and won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

In *The Road*, McCarthy expresses his attitude toward humanity in the most troubling way. Following the unexplained apocalyptic event, McCarthy portrays humanity as descending into a state of unfathomable barbarism, whose human figures are less human than the sinners in Dante’s *Inferno*.

“Within a year” of the catastrophe, McCarthy writes, “there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road.”

Those who have survived the disaster form marauding bands, traveling the countryside for survivors to rape and devour. McCarthy describes the dungeons where humans are kept as slaves and farmed for their meat. The protagonists, who view themselves as “the good guys,” are presented as completely and utterly alone. Touching moments between the father and son characters appear against a backdrop of hopelessness.

When asked by talk show host Winfrey what he meant to accomplish with this book, McCarthy (in a rare interview) commented, “Maybe since 9/11 people are more concerned with apocalyptic issues,” adding that he wanted audiences to “care about things and people. Life is pretty damn good even when it looks bad. You should be thankful for what you have.”

This confused and fundamentally complacent attitude helps drown out his abilities as a writer.

McCarthy’s skill at prose writing is undeniable, and it was not for nothing that Saul Bellow praised McCarthy in 1981 for his “absolutely overpowering use of language, his life-giving and death-dealing sentences.”

At his best moments, he slips into a simple descriptive style that clearly draws on Hemingway, and he could weave together staccato dialogue with long, individual sentences whose cadence is maintained by prepositions, not punctuation, in a style developed by Faulkner and also favored by the Portuguese writer Jose Saramago.

But McCarthy was drawing largely from reactionary subjective idealist sources, and this drains much of the richness and depth from his prose. Present are Nietzschean conceptions about violence and the will to power as the driving forces of history, as well as the Frankfurt School’s denial of history as a knowable, law-governed process and its rejection of the prospect of human progress. Such a social outlook permeates academia and dominates the thinking of broad sections of the affluent upper middle class today. Those who wish to grapple with and understand the material source of such ideologies should read David North’s *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-left, a Marxist Critique*.

A fresh, new attitude is called for in fiction writing today. In his 1912 lecture *Art and Social Life*, Georgi Plekhanov wrote, “The merit of a literary work is determined in the final analysis by the weightiness of its content.” He continued, “Works whose authors lay store only on form always reflect a definite—and as I have already explained, a *hopelessly negative*—attitude of their authors to their social environment.” (Emphasis in the original).

The crisis of capitalism has wrought pandemics, wars, the threat of environmental collapse and unprecedented levels of exploitation and inequality. But a study of the lessons of history also reveals the revolutionary potential in the present moment. Objective conditions are driving masses of people into struggle on every continent, producing conditions for a revolutionary upsurge of historic proportions.

These struggles, and the changes they bring to the lives of the people going through them, present ample material for artistic creation. Tapping into the vast tangle of social relations and telling the truth about reality are necessary to facilitate a rebirth in realist writing today. This requires a conscious break from McCarthy’s ahistorical, irrationalist and individualist outlook and approach.



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