

# Cormac McCarthy: Conservative Novelist

Alexander Riley

## Novels Discussed

Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* (Vintage: New York, 1985).

—, *All the Pretty Horses* (Vintage: New York, 1992).

—, *The Crossing* (Vintage: New York, 1994).

—, *Cities of the Plain* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1998).

—, *No Country for Old Men* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2005).

“Teaching writing is a hustle,” according to the novelist Cormac McCarthy.<sup>1</sup> Having taken a particularly risible “creative writing” course in college and seen some of the shenanigans that go on in contemporary writing classrooms from a vantage point inside an institution of higher education, I am mightily inclined to agree.

Teaching Cormac McCarthy’s novels, by contrast, is a rather more promising endeavor in intellectual and moral terms. McCarthy is widely recognized as one of the most important living American writers, but there is much misunderstanding of the thrust of his craft, even among those who recognize his status. He is frequently understood as a “dystopian”<sup>2</sup> and even misanthropic writer, a narrator of the awful and amoral brutality of the natural world, whose work ceaselessly depicts the depressing descent of his characters into a kind of nihilistic inevitability.

Though this misreading is understandable given McCarthy’s predilection for graphic violence, it is nonetheless a misreading. There is a distinct moral core in McCarthy’s best-known fiction, and that core can be identified as

1 Richard B. Woodward, “Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1992.

2 Nicholas Parker, “Where to Start with Cormac McCarthy,” *New York Public Library*, July 20, 2017.

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conservative and ultimately Christian. I limit myself here to a consideration of five novels, the collection I would class as his Westerns. All take place in frontier country in the American Southwest and center on the human challenge of conflict, violence, and death. These five books have been widely lauded, but typically not for the reasons I discuss them here.

I have read these novels numerous times over two decades, and I have been assigning them for some five years now in courses on conservative social and political thought. There must be professors of literature who teach McCarthy, despite the ever-increasing debilitation of English and other humanities disciplines with the cultural cancer of wokeism. But I feel safe claiming that there are likely few outside literature departments who have taught as many of his novels as many times as I have. In my experience, students have little difficulty discerning the themes in his work that I discuss here. That professionals in the game of literary analysis experience more trouble in that task tells us more about their preoccupations than about the novels.

A profoundly conservative theme in the McCarthy Westerns is the unyielding bond that ties members of families together, even beyond the grave. Virtually the entirety of the action of the second novel in the border trilogy, *The Crossing*, has to do with Billy Parham's relationship with his brother Boyd. The younger Parham brother—impetuous, honorable, skilled at the rough business of the cowboy—is a twin of another character in the trilogy, John Grady Cole, the main figure in the first book (*All the Pretty Horses*) who later, in the trilogy's conclusion (*Cities of the Plain*), meets Billy and establishes a close relationship with him as a substitute for the fallen Boyd. When Billy returns home after a Mexican misadventure involving his efforts to free a trapped wolf, he finds his parents murdered and his brother gone. He tracks Boyd down and the two return to Mexico, where Boyd dies after becoming separated from his brother. Billy then undertakes a Herculean—perhaps we should better say “Odyssean”—effort to locate his grave, disinters him, and returns to bury him in the United States. Through the storm of chaos of the novel's narrative, the moral guidepost is one's duty to his deceased kinfolk.

The familial bond is presented in the perspective of a traditional heroic male protagonist in each of the novels. *Blood Meridian's* nameless protagonist the Kid, John Grady Cole, Billy Parham, and *No Country for Old Men's* Sheriff Bell exemplify a morally grounded, traditional masculinity that resists the fallacious stereotypes its opponents would like to apply to it. The Kid's character

is less developed than that of the other three, but what they show in greater abundance is already there in him in the earliest novel of this collection. All evince a deep attachment to brothers, literal and symbolic. Billy risks his life to bring Boyd's body back home, and he does the same for his substitute brother, John Grady Cole. When he finds the latter bleeding to death in a Mexican alley, and Cole tells him there is no hope of saving his life, Billy's response is what we expect from one of his character:

You couldn't get me across the border noway.

The hell I can't . . .

The police are huntin me.

JC's bringin the truck. We'll run the goddamn gate if we have to. (*Cities of the Plain* 258)

Sheriff Bell is rightly recognized as a WWII hero, but he is morally troubled by his own sense that this status is unearned because he did not perish in the engagement that earned him his medal. Cole dies in an act of vengeance against the murderer of his fiancée, telling Billy in a pointedly heartbreaking passage that he knows his killing is a transgression that might keep him from heaven, but that he cannot bear the thought of achieving a salvation that his beloved, a prostitute, might be denied. In *All the Pretty Horses* Cole kills another youth in a fight in a Mexican prison but later expresses the deepest remorse for it. It is not ultimately his masculine courage and fierceness that define him, though they are essential to his character. His loyalty to his brothers and his passionate, selfless love for Alejandra in *All the Pretty Horses*, and then for Magdalena in *Cities of the Plain*, are what make him the man he is.

I noted that my case is perhaps hardest to sustain in *Blood Meridian*, owing to the paucity of detail on the Kid's character. Perhaps for this reason, this novel has most often been read as simply a lengthy description—however magnificent in literary terms—of the savage ferocity of the world, and among these five novels it is comparatively elevated by a professional literary world alienated from tales of traditional, conservative moralities. Harold Bloom was perhaps the most celebrated academic partisan of *Blood Meridian*, but he misses the central message of the novel. Bloom sees the book as an analysis of the

Judge, and the Kid is “a cipher”<sup>3</sup> of no great importance in the main themes of the novel except as one of the Judge’s privileged victims. It is certainly correct that McCarthy depicts the West as founded on abject violence and blood, acts of depravity beyond understanding or justification that carved a country out of a wilderness. And it is true too that the Judge’s pronouncements on the state of the world are sometimes startlingly compelling. A long passage on the ontological primacy of war, in which the Judge reduces all human action to the “testing of one’s will and the will of another” in an act from which only one of the two will walk away, is terrifying and breathtaking at once. (*Blood Meridian* 248-51)

Whatever the acuity of his analysis of the Judge, Bloom’s disregard of the Kid’s importance is shortsighted. He fails to see how the latter’s story is echoed in those of the other heroes of the Westerns. The Judge’s charge as to the justification for the Kid’s death is that he abandoned two other members of the Glanton gang, but one must remember the source of the charge. It is demonstrably false, mouthed by an inveterate liar, and he levels it only because he realizes the Kid’s moral core registers such a thing as the worst of crimes, i.e., the imputation of his moral failing causes the Kid psychological suffering, which is the Judge’s real goal. But he committed no such crime. Shelby and Tate, the two men the Kid is accused of abandoning, in fact received acts of compassionate kindness from the Kid.

The Kid is singled out by the Judge precisely for his acts of compassion. He must die, by the Judge’s perverse logic, because he has too little of the bloodthirsty warrior and too much of Christian morality in him. The Kid is an orphan, abandoned to a vicious world from early on, and he has learned to be ruthless when required as a matter of course. But he is also, inexplicably given his dismal history, self-sacrificing in the interests of suffering comrades. After an Apache slaughter, he stays in the desert with a horribly wounded Sproule and shares water with him. He is the only one of the gang who will help the despicable Davey Brown remove an arrow from his thigh.

One of the Kid’s last acts is an attempt to spare the life of a lunatic violent youth who challenges him. Here, the Kid faces his own earlier self, three decades on. “You better go on,” he tells him, and then he addresses his fellows: “You keep him away from me.” But the Kid’s young *Doppelgänger* is lost in this

3 Harold Bloom, “Harold Bloom on Cormac McCarthy, True Heir to Melville and Faulkner On Violence, the Sublime, and *Blood Meridian*’s Place in the American Canon,” *Literary Hub* via *Library of America*, October 16, 2019.

pitiless world, and returns to try and kill the Kid, who instead kills his attacker. “You wouldn’t of lived anyway” comes the Kid’s mournful epitaph to the dead boy.

In this terrible world, such behavior inevitably exposes one to exploitation by merciless others, and in the end, it is this that kills the Kid. But McCarthy’s message is not that the Judge’s way therefore wins. Billy Parham, John Grady Cole, and Sheriff Bell bear a family resemblance to the Kid, though each is more elaborated and developed in this moral regard. Each demonstrates himself a master of violence and death, but also a moral agent who accepts brutality when there is no other choice yet seeks to restrain its reach, kindled as each of them is with a spark of warmth and fellow feeling the origin of which is beyond their ken. Each loses his struggle against violence, but each also affirms his love and compassion as the most essential piece of his humanity, Cole literally in his last breath in a passage that is arguably the pinnacle of McCarthy’s literary craft.

It is undeniably true that compassion can be personally ruinous in the landscape of the Westerns. It is what costs the Kid his life, for he has the opportunity to kill the Judge and refuses it. It is what leads to the murder of Billy’s parents, which is a consequence of the act of compassion he shows the vagrant who later takes their lives. It is John Grady’s inability to abandon the doomed Magdalena that costs him his life too. It is his loyalty to Blevins, a troublesome thirteen year old runaway he and Rawlins encounter in Mexico and allow to accompany them, that ultimately ruins them. And it is Moss’s refusal to shoot Chigurh when he has the chance that permits the satanic antihero to later murder his wife.

But McCarthy’s message is not this bleak account, so loved by some cynical academics and other readers. The moral is that, yes, the world is merciless and cruel and we are inescapably, organically part of it, and yet we are also called to contest it in that cruelty. We are not to drown unmoving in the tide of blood but instead we must endeavor to extricate ourselves from it, even in acts of self-sacrifice. Traditional heroic male compassion is one of the chief things that holds the brutality at bay.

There is a deeply Christian strain in these books. “The cities of the plain” are of course biblical, among which numbered Sodom and Gomorrah. The Mormon missionary in a Mexican church whom Billy encounters in *The Crossing* mentions them. The Mormon also tells Billy a lengthy, jarringly moving story of a Mexican who had lost his son in an earthquake and came to rage against God. Eventually the man came to realize, in the Mormon’s telling, that “the God of

the universe was yet more terrible than men reckoned” and at the same time that “nothing is real save his grace . . . [i]t is God’s grace alone that we are bound by this thread of life . . . [u]ltimately every man’s path is every other’s. There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them.” (*The Crossing* 156, 157, 158) The passage is remarkable in its coruscating spiritual radiance.

Any morally grounded reader finds the end of *Blood Meridian*—the Kid’s death at the hands of the Judge, and the apparent victory of the latter’s evil—all but unbearable, yet this seeming defeat is transcended in the other novels. At the conclusion of the Parham/Cole trilogy, in *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady is long dead and Billy is an old man, whose latter years make a dispiriting tale. Homeless, he has a conversation with a mysterious man beneath an underpass. The man tells him:

Every man’s death is a standing in for every other. And since death comes to all there is no way to abate the fear of it except to love that man who stands for us...That man who is all men and who stands in the dock for us until our own time come and we must stand for him. Do you love him, that man? Will you honor the path he has taken? Will you listen to his tale? (*Cities of the Plain* 288-89)

On the novel’s last page, Parham tells the kind woman who has taken him in: “I aint nothin. I don’t know why you put up with me.” Her response: “I know who you are. And I do know why.” (*Cities of the Plain* 292)

*No Country for Old Men*, the concluding tale of McCarthy’s engagement with the world of the Western, ends in a still more openly faithful mode. Throughout the novel, Bell reminds the reader constantly of the influence on him of his pious wife Loretta. He tells too, at the novel’s conclusion, of seeing a stone water trough outside of a house that someone had painstakingly carved with a hammer and chisel “to last ten thousand years” and wondering: “What was it that he had faith in?” He declares that he “would like to be able to make that kind of promise.” He then recounts a dream of his deceased father, in which the older man carries a flame into a dark, cold landscape: “I knew that whenever I got there he would be there.” It is a hopeful promise of their reunion in eternity.

In a 1992 *New York Times* interview,<sup>4</sup> at the time of the publication of *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy had this to say about human nature: “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.” Many years later, Oprah Winfrey asked him if writing was his passion. He demurred on the term, but then pointed to a grander vocation for the novelist: “Sometimes [writing is] difficult. You have this image of the perfect thing which you can never achieve but which you never stop trying to achieve . . . That’s your guide. You’ll never get there, but without it you won’t get anywhere.”

It would require considerable work to find a more precise definition of the conservative spirit than this: the acknowledgment of a deeply broken world and the concomitant refusal of the possibility of humanly perfection, while yet acknowledging an ideal model that must nonetheless inform our faulty action in the world if we would hope to challenge the world’s depravity and aim for a loftier destination.

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4 Woodward, 1992.