

# **The Road**

## **by Cormac McCarthy**

### About the Book

The searing, postapocalyptic novel destined to become Cormac McCarthy's masterpiece.

A father and his son walk alone through burned America. Nothing moves in the ravaged landscape save the ash on the wind. It is cold enough to crack stones, and when the snow falls it is gray. The sky is dark. Their destination is the coast, although they don't know what, if anything, awaits them there. They have nothing; just a pistol to defend themselves against the lawless bands that stalk the road, the clothes they are wearing, a cart of scavenged food — and each other.

*The Road* is the profoundly moving story of a journey. It boldly imagines a future in which no hope remains, but in which the father and his son, "each the other's world entire," are sustained by love. Awesome in the totality of its vision, it is an unflinching meditation on the worst and the best that we are capable of: ultimate destructiveness, desperate tenacity, and the tenderness that keeps two people alive in the face of total devastation.

### Praise for the Book

"His tale of survival and the miracle of goodness only adds to McCarthy's stature as a living master. It's gripping, frightening and, ultimately, beautiful. It might very well be the best book of the year, period."

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

"Vivid, eloquent . . . *The Road* is the most readable of [McCarthy's] works, and consistently brilliant in its imagining of the posthumous condition of nature and civilization."

— *The New York Times Book Review*

"One of McCarthy's best novels, probably his most moving and perhaps his most personal."

— *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

*Courtesy of Vintage*

## About the Author

### **Cormac McCarthy**

American Novelist (1933– )

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**Known As:** McCarthy, Charles; McCarthy, Charles, Jr.; McCarthy, Cormac

**Personal Information:** Born July 20, 1933, in Providence, RI; son of Charles Joseph and Gladys McCarthy; married Lee Holleman, 1961 (divorced); married Anne de Lisle, 1967 (divorced); married Jennifer Winkley, 1998; children: (first marriage) Cullen, (third marriage) John.

**Education:** Attended University of Tennessee, four years.

**Military/Wartime Service:** U.S. Air Force, 1953–56.

**Addresses:** Home: El Paso, TX. Agent: Amanda Urban, International Creative Management, 40 W. 57th St., New York, NY 10019.

**Career:** Writer.

**Awards:** Ingram-Merrill Foundation grant for creative writing, 1960; American Academy of Arts and Letters traveling fellowship to Europe, 1965–66; William Faulkner Foundation award, 1965, for *The Orchard Keeper*; Rockefeller Foundation grant, 1966; Guggenheim fellowship, 1976; MacArthur Foundation grant, 1981; Jean Stein Award, American Academy and Institution of Arts and Letters, 1991; National Book Award for fiction, 1992, and National Book Critics Award for fiction, both for *All the Pretty Horses*; Lyndhurst Foundation grant; Institute of Arts and Letters award; Pulitzer Prize for fiction, James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction, Quill Award for general fiction, and Oprah Winfrey Book Club selection, all 2007, all for *The Road*.

## WRITINGS

- *The Orchard Keeper*, Random House (New York, NY), 1965 reprinted, Vintage Books (New York, NY), 1993.
- *Outer Dark*, Random House (New York, NY), 1968, reprinted, Vintage Books (New York, NY), 1993.
- *Child of God*, Random House (New York, NY), 1974, reprinted, Vintage Books (New York, NY), 1993.
- *The Gardener's Son* (teleplay; produced as part of "Visions" series, Public Broadcasting System, 1977), published as *The Gardener's Son: A Screenplay*, Ecco Press (Hopewell, NJ), 1996.
- *Suttree*, Random House (New York, NY), 1979, reprinted, Modern Library (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Blood Meridian: or, The Evening Redness in the West*, Random House (New York, NY), 1985, reprinted with an introduction by Harold Bloom, Modern Library (New York, NY), 2001.
- *No Country for Old Men*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2005.
- *The Road*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2006.

- *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*, Vintage Books (New York, NY), 2006.

### **THE BORDER TRILOGY**

- *All the Pretty Horses* (also see below), Random House (New York, NY), 1992.
- *The Crossing* (also see below), Random House (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Cities of the Plain* (also see below), Random House (New York, NY), 1998.
- *The Border Trilogy* (contains *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*), Knopf (New York, NY), 1999.

Also author of the play *The Stonemason*. Contributor to *James Drake*, University of Texas Press (Austin, TX), 2008. Contributor to *Yale Review* and *Sewanee Review*.

**Media Adaptations:** *All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road* have been adapted for film. Author's books have also been adapted for audio, including *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, Recorded Books, 2006.

### **Sidelights**

Cormac McCarthy is frequently compared with such Southern-based writers as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor. A *Dictionary of Literary Biography* contributor stated that McCarthy's work has in common with that of the others "a rustic and sometimes dark humor, intense characters, and violent plots; [he] shares as well their development of universal themes within a highly particularized fictional world, their seriousness of vision, and their vigorous exploration of the English language." "His characters are often outcasts — destitutes or criminals, or both," wrote Richard B. Woodward in the *New York Times Magazine*. "Death, which announces itself often, reaches down from the open sky, abruptly, with a slashed throat or a bullet in the face. The abyss opens up at any misstep."

McCarthy's early novels were often set in eastern Tennessee, while his later work focuses on the American Southwest. He has often been singled out for his individual prose style — beautifully lyrical yet spare, eschewing commas and totally stripped of quotation marks. This style has been a source of complaint for some reviewers; in a *New York Times* review of McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, for example, critic Herbert Mitgang lamented: "This reader was put off at first by the author's all too writerly writing. His joined words, without hyphenation, and his unpunctuated, breathless sentences, call too much attention to themselves." Kurt Tidmore contended in the *Washington Post Book World*, however, that "the reader is never confused. Sentences punctuate themselves by the natural rhythm of their words. Everything is perfectly clear. The poetic never overwhelms the realistic." In addition, wrote Madison Smartt Bell in the *New York Times Book Review*, McCarthy's "elaborate and elevated" prose is "used effectively to frame realistic dialogue, for which his ear is deadly accurate." Bell continued: "Difficult as [McCarthy's writing] may sometimes be, it is also overwhelmingly seductive."

Throughout his career, McCarthy has actively avoided public attention, refusing to participate in lecture tours and seldom granting interviews. “Until very recently,” observed Bell, “he shunned publicity so effectively that he wasn’t even famous for it.” Instead, he has concentrated upon crafting his unique and powerful fictions, unaffected by the critical acclaim that is heaped upon him with each new book. McCarthy has been described by Woodward as “a cult figure with a reputation as a writer’s writer” who is, perhaps, “the best unknown novelist in America.”

In keeping with McCarthy’s reclusive nature, little is known about his early life. He was born Charles McCarthy, Jr., in Providence, Rhode Island, on July 20, 1933, the third of six children in an Irish Catholic family. “Sometime later, he or his family — no one seems to know which — changed his name to Cormac after Cormac MacCarthy, the Irish chieftain who built Blarney Castle,” explained *Texas Monthly* contributor Michael Hall. When Cormac was four, he and his family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, where his father got a job as an attorney for the powerful Tennessee Valley Authority. After high school, McCarthy studied engineering at the University of Tennessee, then entered the U.S. Air Force. He served in Alaska for a couple of years before returning to Tennessee and reentering the university. He married twice, having a son, Cullen, with his first wife, and living for a period in a renovated barn on a pig farm with his second wife. In 1976, he moved to Texas, the source of much of his inspiration for his most famous works. “In El Paso McCarthy has become a ghost celebrity, an urban legend,” Hall wrote. In 1996, the *Texas Monthly* writer continued, several fans spent some time “going through McCarthy’s trash and cataloging it . . . to prove that he was not some mythic desert hermit but just as urban as everyone else in the city of more than half a million.” “Contrary to popular wisdom, McCarthy is not a recluse,” Hall stated. “But he is and always has been an intensely private man and a reluctant public one.”

McCarthy’s first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, deals with three people — a young man who is coming of age in the Tennessee mountains, a bootlegger, and an aged orchard keeper — whose lives are intertwined, even though they don’t meet until the end of the story. “Through these characters,” wrote a *Dictionary of Literary Biography* contributor, “the novel explores the relationship between individual integrity and independence achievable in the remote natural world of the mountains and the social obligations and strictures imposed by the community of men.” J.G. Murray, reviewing *The Orchard Keeper in America*, commented that the book is interesting “because it does not seem to be autobiographical and [it] rejects the influence, more bad than good, of the Southern mystique.” Murray found McCarthy’s view of adulthood “even more precise and sympathetic than his treatment of youth. And, as everyone knows, it is quite exceptional for young writers to be so objective.”

*Outer Dark*, McCarthy’s next novel, is “so centered on guilt and retribution that it is largely structured around scenes of judgment,” according to a *Dictionary of Literary Biography* contributor. *Outer Dark* tells the story of Culla and Rinthy, a brother and sister who suffer the consequences of their incest in very different ways. Many critics, such as Guy Davenport, compared McCarthy’s style in this book to that of William Faulkner. In a *New York Times Book Review* article, Davenport wrote that *Outer Dark* “pays its homage

to Faulkner,” but went on to note that McCarthy’s personal writing style “compels admiration, [being] compounded of Appalachian phrases as plain and as functional as an ax. In elegant counterpoint to this bare-bones English is a second diction taken from that rich store of English which is there in the dictionary to be used by those who can.”

Lester Ballard, the title character of McCarthy’s *Child of God*, is a demented backwoodsman, a murderer and necrophiliac. In this 1974 novel the author depicts the spiritual demise of Ballard and at the same time makes him a sympathetic figure. But Richard P. Brickner, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, described *Child of God* as “an essentially sentimental novel that no matter how sternly it strives to be tragic is never more than morose.” Similarly, in a review for *Commonweal*, contributor Robert Leiter called the book “thinner [and] less full-bodied than either *The Orchard Keeper* or *Outer Dark* . . . *Child of God* is a swift exciting read, but we are left with only incisive images strung along a thin plot line, the why and wherefore unexplained.” Leiter surmised that the book “will perhaps be looked upon as a bad novel written by a good writer” and noted that “this would be regrettable, for *Child of God* marks a progression in McCarthy’s career. He has learned restraint. The ‘old themes’ live on in him, but his South is not rendered with the precision of a realist. He has taken realism to the province of folk myth.”

*Child of God* is “a reading experience so impressive, so ‘new’, so clearly made well that it seems almost to defy the easy esthetic categories and at the same time cause me to thrash about for some help with the necessary description of my enthusiasm,” stated Doris Grumbach in *New Republic*, adding, “Cormac McCarthy is a Southerner, a born storyteller, . . . a writer of natural, impeccable dialogue, a literary child of Faulkner.” Grumbach went on to comment that in McCarthy’s style, “the journey from death-in-life to death-in-death, from the hunted to the discovery of the hunting . . . is accomplished in rare, spare, precise yet poetic prose.” The reviewer felt also wrote that the author “has allowed us direct communion with his special kind of chaos; every sentence he writes illuminates, if only for a moment, the great dark of madness and violence and inevitable death that surrounds us all.”

In a *New Yorker* review of *Child of God*, Robert Coles compared McCarthy to ancient Greek dramatists, saying that he “simply writes novels that tell us we cannot comprehend the riddles of human idiosyncrasy, the influence of the merely contingent or incidental upon our lives. He is a novelist of religious feeling who appears to subscribe to no creed but who cannot stop wondering in the most passionate and honest way what gives life meaning.” Coles went on to write in the same review: “From the isolated highlands of Tennessee he sends us original stories that show how mysterious or confusing the world is. Moreover, his mordant wit, his stubborn refusal to bend his writing to the literary and intellectual demands of our era, conspire at times to make him seem mysterious and confusing — a writer whose fate is to be relatively unknown and often misinterpreted. But both Greek playwrights and Christian theologians have been aware that such may be the fate of anyone, of even the most talented and sensitive of human beings.”

McCarthy's fourth novel, *Suttree*, again focuses on a misfit character, Cornelius Suttree, and the undesirable society he inhabits. In this book, the author describes Suttree as a man who has spent years in "the company of thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpolls, murderers, gamblers, bawds, whores, trulls, brigands, toppers, tosspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks, smellsmocks, runagates, rakes, and other assorted and felonious debauchees." Guy Davenport pointed out possible autobiographical elements in the novel and wondered if McCarthy "had asked what part of himself bears the imprint of the world in which he was raised, and answered himself by witnessing what these traits look like exemplified by a gallery of characters ranging from near-idiotic to noble." Writing in *National Review*, Davenport noted further that the reader is "won over . . . to Cormac McCarthy's radically original way with tone and his sense of the aloneness of people in their individuality. At the heart of *Suttree* there is a strange sense of transformation and rebirth in which the protagonist wanders in a forest, sees visions, and emerges as a stranger to all that was before familiar. This is a scene no one else could have written."

Anatole Broyard wrote of the author in a *New York Times* review of *Suttree*: "His people are so vivid that they seem exotic, but this is just another way of saying that we tend to forget the range of human differences. Mr. McCarthy's hyperbole is not Southern rhetoric, but flesh and blood. Every tale is tall, if you look at it closely enough."

In his next novel, 1985's *Blood Meridian: or, The Evening Redness in the West*, McCarthy leaves his home territory of Tennessee for the dusty plains of the Old West, a change possibly the result of the author's own relocation to El Paso, Texas, in 1974. *Blood Meridian* is by far McCarthy's bloodiest novel to date, detailing the adventures of a fourteen-year-old boy referred to only as "the kid" as he travels with a band of bounty hunters, paid by a Mexican governor to collect Indian scalps. The hunters, however, are not picky about their victims, leaving a long, bloody trail behind them as they go. "*Blood Meridian* comes at the reader like a slap in the face," wrote Caryn James in the *New York Times Book Review*. "While [it] is hard to get through, it is harder to ignore."

Though *Blood Meridian* is based loosely upon actual events of the 1840s and 1850s, it bears little resemblance to the historical westerns written by Louis L'Amour and others; instead, Woodward pointed out, it "has distinct echoes of *Moby Dick*, McCarthy's favorite book," for it concentrates on the barren, hellish landscape and near-surreal characters that make up the band of mercenaries. Most prominent among them is a huge, hairless man named Judge Holden. Though he is not the group's leader, "the Judge" commands the respect of the others as he pontificates by the fire each night. It is against the background of Judge Holden that the kid is placed, allowing the reader to evaluate for himself the morality of each character.

In defense of the meticulously detailed gore that pervades his novels, McCarthy told *New York Times Magazine* contributor Woodward: "There's no such thing as life without bloodshed." The author went on to note: "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.” Most importantly, though, the brutality depicted in McCarthy’s writing has not reduced its power; rather, according to James, he “has asked us to witness evil not in order to understand it but to affirm its inexplicable reality; his elaborate language invents a world hinged between the real and surreal, jolting us out of complacency.”

“By comparison with the sonority and carnage of *Blood Meridian*,” wrote Woodward, “the world of *All the Pretty Horses* is less risky — repressed but sane.” Winner of the National Book Award, *All the Pretty Horses* is the first installment in a three-book epic titled “The Border Trilogy.” Set in 1949, it tells the story of John Grady Cole, a sixteen-year-old Texan who, along with his friend, Lacey Rawlins, sets off on horseback for Mexico. It becomes a coming-of-age tale, with Cole learning the skills of survival, facing adversity, and finding romance, all set against the backdrop of a land that has not lost the magic of the old West. “In the hands of some other writer,” noted Bell, “this material might make for a combination of *Lonesome Dove* and *Huckleberry Finn*, but Mr. McCarthy’s vision is deeper than Larry McMurtry’s and, in its own way, darker than Mark Twain’s.” “What he has given us is a book of remarkable beauty and strength,” wrote Tidmore, “the work of a master in perfect command of his medium.”

While *All the Pretty Horses* is considered one of McCarthy’s most accessible novels, it did not receive universally favorable reviews. This is due, in part, to the popularity of the novel, which opened it to criticism by reviewers previously unfamiliar with McCarthy’s work. The strength of *All the Pretty Horses* seems to lie in the integrity of its central character, Cole, who was described by Bruce Allen in the *World & I* as “both a credible and admirable character; he is a perfect vehicle for the expression of the novel’s themes.” Watching Cole adhere to his values in the face of near-insurmountable adversity gives *All the Pretty Horses* “a sustained innocence and a lucidity new in McCarthy’s work,” according to Woodward. In addition to winning the National Book Award and garnering its author much greater critical attention, *All the Pretty Horses* also proved to be a tremendous commercial success.

The second installment in McCarthy’s “Border Trilogy,” 1994’s *The Crossing* covers much of the same geographical and emotional terrain as *All the Pretty Horses*. *The Crossing* is divided into three sections. In the first, Billy Parham attempts to trap a wolf that has been killing cattle on his family’s New Mexico ranch. After he successfully catches the animal, Billy decides to return it to its original territory in Mexico rather than kill it. Billy thus crosses the border with Mexico for the first time in the novel; unfortunately, the wolf is stolen for use in a dog-fighting arena, and Billy has to kill it to end its painful circumstance. After burying the wolf, Billy returns home to find that horse thieves have murdered his parents. The novel’s second section finds Billy and his brother, Boyd, again crossing the border into Mexico in search of their parents’ killers and their stolen horses. The brothers find and reclaim some of the horses, battle bandits, and have other picaresque adventures. At the close of the section, Boyd falls in love and returns home with a Mexican woman. In the third section, Billy decides after two years to journey back into Mexico to find Boyd. After hearing a song in which Boyd’s death is

described, Billy locates his brother's body and returns to New Mexico to bury it on his family's ranch.

As happened with *All the Pretty Horses*, critical reaction to *The Crossing* was starkly divided, with some reviewers terming the book an American masterpiece and others criticizing it as overwritten and pretentious. Writing in the *Chicago Tribune Books*, Bruce Allen dubbed it an "ambitious novel" that "offers a masterly display of tonal control and some of the most pitch-perfect rapturous prose being written these days." In particular, Allen praised the "dozens of breathtakingly imaginative descriptive passages" in the book. Michiko Kakutani, contributor to the *New York Times* also disliked the novel, commenting that "the overall result is not a mythic, post-modernist masterpiece, but a hodge-podge of a book that is derivative, sentimental and pretentious all at once." At the other end of the critical divide, *New York Times Book Review* contributor Robert Hass declared *The Crossing* to be "a miracle in prose, an American original. It deserves to sit on the same shelf certainly with [Toni Morrison's] *Beloved* and [William Faulkner's] *As I Lay Dying*." Commending the novel's "violent and stunningly beautiful, inconsolable landscapes," Hass called *The Crossing* "a masterwork."

The trilogy concluded with 1998's *Cities of the Plain*. The last installment in the series unites John Grady Cole, the protagonist of *All the Pretty Horses*, with *The Crossing*'s Billy Parham. Set in New Mexico in the 1950s, the novel finds both men working as horse wranglers at the Cross Fours Ranch. Like the previous books in the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain* contains plenty of tight dialogue, cowboy philosophy, extreme violence, and carefully rendered descriptions of the Western landscape. As in *All the Pretty Horses*, the plot comes to focus on romance — in this case, Cole's doomed love for Magdalena, an epileptic Mexican prostitute whose affections are also coveted by her pimp, Eduardo. When Cole's attempt to purchase Magdalena from her boss fails, he plots instead to smuggle her across the Mexican border. After Eduardo learns of the planned escape, however, he arranges to have Magdalena kidnapped and killed. Despite Billy's efforts to keep Cole out of trouble, the younger man returns to the brothel, seeking retribution for Magdalena's death. He enters into a knife fight with Eduardo.

Critics responded to the concluding volume of the "Border Trilogy" with mixed reactions. The *Review of Contemporary Fiction*'s Brian Evenson found that despite "some exceptional manipulations of prose," the novel "fails to measure up to either of the two previous volumes." Chilton Williamson, Jr., writing in the *National Review* commented that "*Cities of the Plain* in some ways makes a less than fitting conclusion to the trilogistic narrative" — although the critic noted that "over three volumes [McCarthy's] writing has lost none of its eloquence nor the description its particularist power." In his assessment of the narrative for *World Literature Today*, William Riggan unfavorably compared its "leisurely, measured, elegiac . . . and dull" pacing and tone with the "action-rich, dialogue-filled, character-driven *Horses*" and *The Crossing*. By contrast, *Time* contributor R.Z. Sheppard applauded McCarthy's efforts "to do for cowpunching what Melville did for whaling: describe in documentary detail how the job is done," and called the author "a virtuoso of the lyric description and the free-range sentence."

Despite the groundbreaking success of his “Border Trilogy,” McCarthy remains elusive. He is, as Woodward wrote, “a radical conservative who still believes that the novel can, in his words, ‘encompass all the various disciplines and interests of humanity.’” Summarizing his work, a *Dictionary of Literary Biography* contributor stressed: “McCarthy is in no way a commercial writer. He is a novelist by profession, and he has not supplemented his income by turning his hand to more lucrative kinds of work such as Hollywood screenwriting.” The contributor also noted: “His most perceptive reviewers have consistently predicted more of the same solid work from McCarthy, and he has fulfilled these predictions. He deserves, now, serious attention from students of literature.”

McCarthy followed the critical and popular success of the “Border Trilogy” novels with two sparse but powerful novels that have further enhanced his reputation both among critics and the reading public. McCarthy’s 2005 novel, *No Country for Old Men*, was called “a mesmerizing modern-day western” by a *Publishers Weekly* contributor. Set in 1980 in southwest Texas, the novel revolves around the discovery in the desert of drug deal gone bad. Llewelyn Moss, a Vietnam War veteran, comes upon several dead bodies, a stash of heroin, and nearly two and a half million dollars in cash.

In this “bleak chronicle of murder, revenge and implacable fate,” as the novel was described by a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor, the reader follows Moss as he is pursued by a philosophizing psychopath named Anton Chigurh, who is out to get the drug cartel’s money. However, Chigurh decides to double cross his employers, which leads to the cartel hiring Carson Wells, an ex Army Special Forces soldier now working as a freelance gun for hire. Also involved in the case is Sheriff Bell, an older lawman who sees the entire affair as indicative of the world going to ruin. “The book is both a pacey modern western and an imagining of how Sheriff Bell, forty-one years in office without a murder left unsolved, deals with the modern horror,” noted a *New Statesman* contributor.

Although reviewers did not rank *No Country for Old Men* among McCarthy’s best novels, such as *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*, the novel still received widespread praise. “The ending, as haunting as it is unexpected, will sit with you long after you’ve left your beach chair,” wrote Taylor Antrim in *Vogue*. Tom Chiarella, writing a review of *No Country for Old Men* in *Esquire*, noted that the author’s “prose [is] the most laudable, his characters the most fully inhabited, his sense of place the most . . . thoroughly felt of any living writer’s.” Several reviewers also noted that *No Country for Old Men* is different significantly from the author’s earlier novels of the American West. Referring to the novel as “perhaps McCarthy’s most contemporary fiction,” *Spectator* contributor Robert Edric went on to write in the same review that, unlike some of the author’s “experiments with prose and narrative style . . . [No Country for Old Men] sees a return to the far simpler structures of *Child of God* and *Outer Dark*, where the unfolding tension and speed of events engage the reader, and where the prose is paced and tempered accordingly.” Calling the book “unlike any of his others,” Jack Sexton also wrote in *Quadrant* that it is his “most readable” novel.

In McCarthy's next novel, *The Road*, the violence and mayhem of *No Country for Old Men* is taken to disastrous proportions as a man and his son travel a road following some sort of apocalypse that has returned human kind to the survival of the fittest, or perhaps, the most ruthless. Like the "kid" in *Blood Meridian*, the novel's protagonists are never named except as the "man" and the "boy." Pushing an old shopping cart that carries anything they can find to help them survive, the two head for the coast, trying to avoid the bands of surviving marauders who steal and murder. Things are so bad that, at one point, the two encounter people being kept locked up as "meat" for slaughter. "The horror . . . is unrelieved, and we feel that McCarthy, our great chronicler of violence, is filling out his oeuvre with a projection of ultimate destruction," wrote Todd Shy in the *Christian Century*.

Commenting on the author's "portrayal of post-apocalyptic suffering," *National Catholic Reporter* contributor Tom Ryan added: "it does so with bleak, precise eloquence that builds anticipation and gradually accelerates readers toward an unexpected conclusion." McCarthy never tells the reader exactly what has happened. Instead, he focuses on the protagonists' efforts to survive as they follow an outdated map and head to the coast, where the father believes that their chances at making it will be better. Despite the violence and mayhem that the father and son encounter, the real focus of the novel is the relationship between the two and the father's devotion to his son, whom he sees not only as being a better person than himself but also a symbol of hope for the future.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Niall Griffiths noted the dichotomy of *The Road*, calling it "of the saddest, most desolate, most horrifying books I've read in years" but later adding "it so good that it will devour you, in parts. It is incandescent." And *Spectator* contributor Sebastian Smee wrote: "More than an allegory or fantasy, *The Road* is a frighteningly credible novel. In some ways, I wish I had not read it." In spite of its bleak tone, *The Road* resonated with critics, earning widespread critical acclaim, including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and Great Britain's prestigious James Tait Black Memorial Prize.

In *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*, published in 2006, the author once again features two unnamed characters. In fact, "White" and "Black" are the novel's only characters. Having met after White tried to kill himself by jumping in front of a subway only to have Black save him, the white man and black man sit and talk about the meaning of existence. The white man is a jaded intellectual who wishes for death as a way to escape a meaningless life while the black man, an ex-convict and drug addict, is a born-again Christian who maintains that there is hope in the world. "The sparse and minimal setting, created through McCarthy's careful, pointed craftsmanship, consistently fills this bizarre yet profound conversation with energy," wrote Avi Kramer in *Kliatt*. Writing in *Texas Monthly*, Mike Shea noted that the author's "passionate word craft transcends all staginess."

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Discussion Questions

1. Cormac McCarthy has an unmistakable prose style. What do you see as the most distinctive features of that style? How is the writing in *The Road* in some ways more like poetry than narrative prose?
2. Why do you think McCarthy has chosen not to give his characters names? How do the generic labels of “the man” and “the boy” affect the way in which readers relate to them?
3. How is McCarthy able to make the postapocalyptic world of *The Road* seem so real and utterly terrifying? Which descriptive passages are especially vivid and visceral in their depiction of this blasted landscape? What do you find to be the most horrifying features of this world and the survivors who inhabit it?
4. McCarthy doesn’t make explicit what kind of catastrophe has ruined the earth and destroyed human civilization, but what might be suggested by the many descriptions of a scorched landscape covered in ash? What is implied by the father’s statement that “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world” [p. 32]?
5. As the father is dying, he tells his son he must go on in order to “carry the fire.” When the boy asks if the fire is real, the father says, “It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it” [p. 279]. What is this fire? Why is it so crucial that they not let it die?
6. McCarthy envisions a postapocalyptic world in which “murder was everywhere upon the land” and the earth would soon be “largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” [p. 181]. How difficult or easy is it to imagine McCarthy’s nightmare vision actually happening? Do you think people would likely behave as they do in the novel, under the same circumstances? Does it now seem that human civilization is headed toward such an end?
7. The man and the boy think of themselves as the “good guys.” In what ways are they like and unlike the “bad guys” they encounter? What do you think McCarthy is suggesting in the scenes in which the boy begs his father to be merciful to the strangers they encounter on the road? How is the boy able to retain his compassion — to be, as one reviewer put it, “compassion incarnate”?
8. The sardonic blind man named Ely who the man and boy encounter on the road tells the father that “There is no God and we are his prophets” [p. 170]. What does he mean by this? Why does the father say about his son, later in the same conversation, “What if I said that he’s a god?” [p. 172] Are we meant to see the son as a savior?

9. *The Road* takes the form of a classic journey story, a form that dates back to Homer's *Odyssey*. To what destination are the man and the boy journeying? In what sense are they "pilgrims"? What, if any, is the symbolic significance of their journey?
10. McCarthy's work often dramatizes the opposition between good and evil, with evil sometimes emerging triumphant. What does *The Road* ultimately suggest about good and evil? Which force seems to have greater power in the novel?
11. What makes the relationship between the boy and his father so powerful and poignant? What do they feel for each other? How do they maintain their affection for and faith in each other in such brutal conditions?
12. Why do you think McCarthy ends the novel with the image of trout in mountain streams before the end of the world: "In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" [p. 287]. What is surprising about this ending? Does it provide closure, or does it prompt a rethinking of all that has come before? What does it suggest about what lies ahead?

*Courtesy of Vintage*