Cormac McCarthy Bio

Pulitzer Prize winning novelist and playwright, Cormac McCarthy, was born Charles McCarthy, Jr., on July 20, 1933, in Providence, Rhode Island. He was the third of six children born to Charles and Gladys McCarthy, preceded by sisters Jackie and Bobbie, and followed by Bill, Maryellen, and Dennis. In 1937, his parents moved the family to Knoxville, Tennessee, where his father was employed as a lawyer with the Tennessee Valley Authority.

McCarthy spent much of his life in Tennessee, and his early works are clearly influenced by that region. His first four published novels, The Orchard Keeper (1965), Outer Dark (1968), Child of God (1973), and Suttree (1979), reflect the culture, myth and character of East Tennessee and Appalachia.

McCarthy briefly attended The University of Tennessee (UT) from 1951 to 1952 before serving four years in the U.S. Air Force, including two years in Alaska where he hosted a radio program. In 1957, he returned to UT where he published the short stories “A Drowning Incident” and “Wake for Susan” in the student literary magazine, The Phoenix. His literary talent did not go unrecognized at UT, and McCarthy received the Ingram-Merrill Award for creative writing in 1959 and 1960, firsts in a long list of literary accolades to come.

In 1960, McCarthy left UT without his degree and moved to Chicago where he worked part time in an auto parts warehouse and pursued his writing. He married poet and former UT student, Lee Holleman; the couple had one son, Cullen. In 1961, they moved to Sevier County, Tennessee, where the marriage ended in divorce in 1962. McCarthy left Tennessee again, this time moving to Asheville, North Carolina, and then New Orleans where he continued work on his first novel, The Orchard Keeper. Set in rural Tennessee between the two world wars, it is the story of a boy, John Wesley Rattner, and the bootlegger, Marion Slyder, who has killed the boy’s father.

McCarthy has notably kept his distance from reporters, but in 1992 he granted Richard Woodward a rare interview published in The New York Times Magazine. In that interview, he confessed that he sent the manuscript for The Orchard Keeper to Random House because, “it was the only publisher I had heard of.” At Random House, McCarthy was paired with renowned editor, Albert Erskine, who had worked with literary giants such as Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner. McCarthy’s Southern Gothic novels continue to be compared with those of the latter, and McCarthy’s debut novel earned him the William Faulkner Foundation Award in 1965. Erskine remained McCarthy’s editor for over twenty years - until his retirement in the mid 1980s. Blood Meridian (1985) was their final collaboration.

In the same year The Orchard Keeper was published, McCarthy received the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters traveling fellowship, and he used the funds to go to Ireland. En route on the ocean liner, Sylvania, he met English dancer and singer, Anne De Lisle, and the two were married in England in 1966. A Rockefeller Foundation grant McCarthy received that same year supported the couple as they traveled through Europe and lived briefly on the Spanish island of Ibiza where McCarthy began work on his second novel, Outer Dark. They eventually moved to Tennessee, settling in Rockford, near Knoxville.

Outer Dark was published in 1968. It tells the story of brother and sister, Culla and Rinthy Holme, who have a child together. He lies, claiming the child has died, and leaves to search for paying work. She then searches for her “littlest chap.” Like McCarthy’s debut novel, Outer Dark was a critical, if not popular, success. The selection committee for the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation agreed with the critics, and McCarthy was awarded a Fellowship for Creative Writing in 1969.

McCarthy’s third novel, Child of God, was published in 1973. The story of the isolated mass murderer and necrophile, Lester Ballard, is loosely based on an historical figure in Sevier County, Tennessee. Like his previous works, Child of God could not be considered a commercial success, but a steady following of devoted readers and critics grew.

Following Child of God, McCarthy departed from the novel format to write the script for The Gardener's Son, an episode in the PBS series, Visions. It first aired January 6, 1977 and starred Brad Dourif, Ned Beatty, and Kevin Conway as members of two feuding South Carolina families, the wealthy Greggs, and the blue-collar McEvoys.

Suttree, McCarthy’s fourth novel, was published in 1979. Written over the span of twenty years, the semi-autobiographical novel set in the early 1950s follows Cornelius Suttree, a fisherman on the Tennessee River who lives on the fringe of society after severing ties with his family and abandoning his wife and son. Many of the characters are reflections of people that McCarthy knew in Knoxville and the surrounding area.

By the time Suttree was published, McCarthy was living in El Paso, Texas. He had separated from De Lisle in 1976, and the two divorced in 1978. In 1981, McCarthy won a coveted MacArthur Fellowship, commonly referred to as a “genius grant.” The five-year grant provides recipients with “flexibility to pursue their creative activities in the absence of specific obligations or reporting requirements,” and it allowed McCarthy to concentrate on his next writing project.

McCarthy’s move to the southwest brought a shift in the settings of his novels. He began work on what he termed his “western,” which was published in 1985 as Blood Meridian. In his 1992 interview with Woodward, McCarthy states, “I’ve always been interested in the Southwest. There isn’t a place in the world you can go where they don’t know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West.” In Blood Meridian, McCarthy tackled the myth of the West head-on with his mid-nineteenth century border story of “the kid” and a band of American mercenaries hired to kill and scalp Indians in Mexico. The novel firmly thrust McCarthy into the center of the American literary canon. Critic Harold Bloom declared Blood Meridian, “the authentic American apocalyptic novel,” stating, “The fulfilled renown of Moby-Dick and of As I Lay Dying is augmented by Blood Meridian, since Cormac McCarthy is the worthy disciple both of Melville and of Faulkner. I venture that no other living American novelist, not even Pynchon, has given us a book as strong and memorable.”

McCarthy followed Blood Meridian with three novels set on the Texas-Mexico border in the mid- twentieth century, and which reveal the dreams and coming-of-age of two remarkable characters, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham. All the Pretty Horses (1992), The Crossing (1994), and Cities of the Plain (1998), known collectively as “The Border Trilogy,” were McCarthy’s first novels published after Erskine’s retirement and McCarthy’s move from Random House to Knopf. They also mark another significant shift in McCarthy’s career -- for the first time, his novels were bestsellers.

McCarthy continued to receive praise from critics; All the Pretty Horses won the National Book Award in 1992 and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1993. And he received personal accolades with his induction into the El Paso Herald-Post Hall of Fame in 1991 and his reception of the Texas Institute of Letters Lon Tinkle Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997. In 2000, All the Pretty Horses was released as a film directed by Billy Bob Thornton and starring Matt Damon as John Grady Cole. Ted Tally wrote the screenplay.

While McCarthy is best known for his novel writing, he has also written in other formats. The Stonemason, a play about an African-American family in Louisville, Kentucky that he wrote in the 1970s was revised and published by Ecco Press in 1994. And in 2006, Sunset Limited, a novel in dramatic form originally performed by Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre Company, was published in paperback by Vintage Books.

McCarthy initially began No Country for Old Men as a screenplay in the 1980s, but he eventually abandoned the format. Instead, the suspenseful story of sociopathic killer Anton Chiguhr’s pursuit of Llewelyn Moss was published in 2005 as his ninth novel. Ethan and Joel Coen adapted it for film in 2007, starring Javier Bardem as Chiguhr, Josh Brolin as Moss, and Tommy Lee Jones as sheriff Ed Tom Bell. In interviews supporting the film’s release, the Coen brothers joked that in adapting the novel for the screen, one of them simply held the book open while the other typed. The film won four Academy Awards, including best picture, and best screenplay adaptation.

McCarthy’s tenth novel, The Road, was published in 2006. The post-apocalyptic story of a father and son’s journey across a ruined landscape was dedicated to his son John Francis, from his third marriage to Jennifer Winkley. The novel won McCarthy the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for fiction as well as the United Kingdom’s oldest literary award, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction. In March 2007, Oprah Winfrey selected The Road as a reading for her popular book club, and the reclusive McCarthy made his first televised interview on her show that year.

McCarthy currently resides in the Santa Fe, New Mexico area, where he enjoys an affiliation with the multi-disciplinary Santa Fe Institute and continues to write.