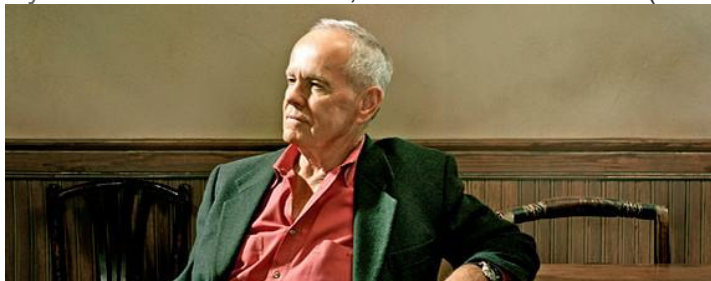


Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy

Author Cormac McCarthy, 76, talked about love, religion, his 11-year-old son, the end of the world and the movie based on his novel *The Road*. He was just getting going.

By JOHN JURGENSEN, *Wall Street Journal* (Nov. 20, 2009)



Cormac McCarthy, above in 2007, drew on his own relationship with his son for his novel 'The Road.'

Novelist Cormac McCarthy shuns interviews, but he relishes conversation. Last week, the author sat down on the leafy patio of the Menger Hotel, built about 20 years after the siege of the Alamo, the remains of which are next door.

The afternoon conversation, which also included film director John Hillcoat of *The Road*, went on 'til dark, then moved to a nearby restaurant for dinner. Dressed in crisp jeans and dimpled brown cowboy boots, Mr. McCarthy began the meal with a Bombay Gibson, up.

The 76-year-old author first broke through with his 1985 novel *Blood Meridian*, a tale of American mercenaries hunting Indians in the Mexican borderland. Commercial success came later with 1992's *All the Pretty Horses*, a National Book Award winner and the first installment of a Border Trilogy. Critics delved into his detailed vision of the West, his painterly descriptions of violence, and his muscular prose stripped of most punctuation.

The writer himself, however, has proved more elusive. He won't be found at book festivals, readings and other places novelists gather. Mr. McCarthy prefers hanging out with "smart people" outside his field, like professional poker players and the thinkers at the Santa Fe Institute, a theoretical-science foundation in New Mexico where the author is a longtime fellow.

In recent years, his circle has inched further into Hollywood. Many new readers discovered him as the source of the 2007 film *No Country for Old Men*, a thriller that hinged on a briefcase full of drug money and a remorseless killer. Directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, it won four Academy Awards.

Now, set for release Nov. 25 is a screen adaptation of *The Road*, a novel that marked another major stage of Mr. McCarthy's career. As intimate as it is grim, the book tells the story of a man's bond with his young son as the two struggle for survival years after a cataclysm has erased society. The novel won a Pulitzer Prize in 2007 and was promoted heavily by Oprah Winfrey as a surprising selection for her book club.



Viggo Mortensen in the movie adaptation 'The Road' directed by John Hillcoat.

The movie, starring Viggo Mortensen as the father and Kodi Smit-McPhee (11 years old at the time of shooting) as his son, closely follows the book's bleak narrative, including encounters with cannibals. Hillcoat is an Australian who made the violent 2005 Western-style tale *The Proposition*, set in the Outback. To replicate the blighted landscapes in *The Road*, Hillcoat shot much of the movie in wintertime Pittsburgh, where remnants of the region's coal and steel history lent to the desolation.

The backstory of McCarthy's novel is deeply personal, springing from his relationship with his 11-year-old son, John, whom he had with his third wife, Jennifer. As death bears down in *The Road*, the main character obsessively protects his son and prepares him to carry on alone: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke."

McCarthy flew here from his home near Santa Fe to visit the production office of his friend Tommy Lee Jones. A star of *No Country for Old Men*, the actor directed and starred with Samuel L. Jackson in a film based on a play by McCarthy, *The Sunset Limited*. It begins with one man preventing another from hurling himself in front of a subway train, and will air on HBO next year.

Messrs. McCarthy and Hillcoat showed easy affability in their friendship, despite what could have been a prickly collaboration. Hillcoat told him, "You relieved a huge burden from my shoulders when you said, 'Look, a novel's a novel and a film's a film, and they're very different.'" In a soft voice, chuckling frequently and gazing intently with gray-green eyes, Mr. McCarthy talked about books vs. films, the apocalypse, fathers and sons, past and future projects, how he writes—& God.

***The Wall Street Journal*: When you sell the rights to your books, do the contracts give you some oversight over the screenplay, or is it out of your hands?**

Mr. McCarthy: No, you sell it and you go home and go to bed. You don't embroil yourself in somebody else's project.

WSJ: When you first went to the film set, how did it compare with how you saw *The Road* in your head?

CM: I guess my notion of what was going on in *The Road* did not include 60 to 80 people and a bunch of cameras. [Director] Dick Pearce and I made a film in North Carolina about 30 years ago and I thought, "This is just hell. Who would do this?" Instead, I get up and have a cup of coffee and wander around and read a little bit, sit down and type a few words and look out the window.



A scene from 'The Road.' DIMENSION FILMS

WSJ: But is there something compelling about the collaborative process compared to the solitary job of writing?

CM: Yes, it would compel you to avoid it at all costs.

WSJ: When you discussed making "The Road" into a movie with John, did he press you on what had caused the disaster in the story?

CM: A lot of people ask me. I don't have an opinion. At the Santa Fe Institute I'm with scientists of all disciplines, and some of them in geology said it looked like a meteor to them. But it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important. The whole thing now is, what do you do? The last time the caldera in Yellowstone blew, the entire North American continent was under about a foot of ash. People who've gone diving in Yellowstone Lake say that there is a bulge in the floor that is now about 100 feet high and the whole thing is just sort of pulsing. From different people you get different answers, but it could go in another three to four thousand years or it could go on Thursday. No one knows.

WSJ: What kind of things make you worry?

CM: If you think about some of the things that are being talked about by thoughtful, intelligent scientists, you realize that in 100 years the human race won't even be recognizable. We may indeed be part machine and we may have computers implanted. It's more than theoretically possible to implant a chip in the brain that would contain all the information in all the libraries in the world. As people who have talked about this say, it's just a matter of figuring out the wiring. Now there's a problem you can take to bed with you at night.

WSJ: *The Road* is this love story between father and son, but they never say, "I love you."

CM: No. I didn't think that would add anything to the story at all. But a lot of the lines that are in there are verbatim conversations my son John and I had. I mean just that when I say that he's the co-author of the book. A lot of the things that the kid [in the book] says are things that John said. John said, "Papa, what would you do if I died?" I said, "I'd want to die, too," and he said, "So you could be with me?" I said, "Yes, so I could be with you." Just a conversation that two guys would have.

WSJ: Why don't you sign copies of *The Road*?

CM: There are signed copies of the book, but they all belong to my son John, so when he turns 18 he can sell them and go to Las Vegas or whatever. No, those are the only signed copies of the book.

WSJ: How many did you have?

CM: 250. So occasionally I get letters from book dealers or whoever that say, "I have a signed copy of the *The Road*," and I say, "No. You don't."

WSJ: What was your relationship like with the Coen brothers on *No Country for Old Men*?

CM: We met and chatted a few times. I enjoyed their company. They're smart and they're very talented. Like John, they didn't need any help from me to make a movie.

WSJ: *All the Pretty Horses* was also turned into a film [starring Matt Damon and Penelope Cruz]. Were you happy with the way it came out?

CM: It could've been better. As it stands today it could be cut and made into a pretty good movie. The director had the notion that he could put the entire book up on the screen. Well, you can't do that. You have to pick out the story that you want to tell and put that on the screen. And so he made this four-hour film and then he found that if he was actually going to get it released, he would have to cut it down to two hours.

WSJ: Does this issue of length apply to books, too? Is a 1,000-page book somehow too much?

CM: For modern readers, yeah. People apparently only read mystery stories of any length. With mysteries, the longer the better and people will read any damn thing. But the indulgent, 800-page books that were written a hundred years ago are just not going to be written anymore and people need to get used to that. If you think you're going to write something like *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Moby-Dick*, go ahead. Nobody will read it. I don't care how good it is, or how smart the readers are. Their intentions, their brains are different.

WSJ: People have said *Blood Meridian* is unfilmable because of the sheer darkness and violence of the story.

CM: That's all crap. The fact that it's a bleak and bloody story has nothing to do with whether or not you can put it on the screen. That's not the issue. The issue is it would be very difficult to do and would require someone with a bountiful imagination and a lot of balls. But the payoff could be extraordinary.

WSJ: How does the notion of aging and death affect the work you do? Has it become more urgent?

CM: Your future gets shorter and you recognize that. In recent years, I have had no desire to do anything but work and be with [son] John. I hear people talking about going on a vacation or something and I think, what is that about? I have no desire to go on a trip. My perfect day is sitting in a room with some blank paper. That's heaven. That's gold and anything else is just a waste of time.

WSJ: How does that ticking clock affect your work? Does it make you want to write more shorter pieces, or to cap things with a large, all-encompassing work?

CM: I'm not interested in writing short stories. Anything that doesn't take years of your life and drive you to suicide hardly seems worth doing.

WSJ: The last five years have seemed very productive for you. Have there been fallow periods in your writing?

CM: I don't think there's any rich period or fallow period. That's just a perception you get from what's published. Your busiest day might be watching some ants carrying bread crumbs. Someone asked Flannery O'Connor why she wrote, and she said, "Because I was good at it." And I think that's the right answer. If you're good at something it's very hard not to do it. In talking to older people who've had good lives, inevitably half of them will say, "The most significant thing in my life is that I've been extraordinarily lucky." And when you hear that you know you're hearing the truth. It doesn't diminish their talent or industry. You can have all that and fail.

WSJ: Can you tell me about the book you're working on, in terms of story or setting?

CM: I'm not very good at talking about this stuff. It's mostly set in New Orleans around 1980. It has to do with a brother and sister. When the book opens she's already committed suicide, and it's about how he deals with it. She's an interesting girl.

WSJ: Some critics focus on how rarely you go deep with female characters.

CM: This long book is largely about a young woman. There are interesting scenes that cut in throughout the book, all dealing with the past. She's committed suicide about seven years before. **I was planning on writing about a woman for 50 years.** I will never be competent enough to do so, but at some point you have to try.

WSJ: You were born in Rhode Island and grew up in Tennessee. Why did you end up in the Southwest?

CM: I ended up in the Southwest because I knew that nobody had ever written about it. Besides Coca-Cola, the other thing that is universally known is cowboys and Indians. You can go to a mountain village in Mongolia and they'll know about cowboys. But nobody had taken it seriously, not in 200 years. I thought, here's a good subject. And it was.

WSJ: You grew up Irish Catholic.

CM: I did, a bit. **It wasn't a big issue. We went to church on Sunday. I don't even remember religion ever even being discussed.**

WSJ: Is the God that you grew up with in church every Sunday the same God that the man in *The Road* questions and curses?

CM: It may be. **I have a great sympathy for the spiritual view of life,** and I think that it's meaningful. But am I a spiritual person? I would like to be. Not that I am thinking about some afterlife that I want to go to, but just in terms of being a better person. I have friends at the Institute. They're just really bright guys who do really difficult work solving difficult problems, who say, "It's really more important to be good than it is to be smart." And **I agree it is more important to be good than it is to be smart. That is all I can offer you.**

WSJ: Because *The Road* is so personal, did you have any hesitations about seeing it adapted?

CM: No. I've seen John's film [*The Proposition*] and I knew him somewhat by reputation and I thought he'd probably do a good job in respect to the material. Also, my agent [Amanda Urban], she's just the best. She wasn't going to sell the book to somebody unless she had some confidence in what they would do with it. It's not just a matter of money.

JH: Didn't you start *No Country for Old Men* as a screenplay?

CM: Yeah, I wrote it. I showed it to a few people and they didn't seem to be interested. In fact, they said, "That will never work." Years later I got it out and turned it into a novel. Didn't take long. I was at the Academy Awards with the Coens. They had a table full of awards before the evening was over, sitting there like beer cans. One of the first awards that they got was for Best Screenplay, and Ethan came back and he said to me, "Well, I didn't do anything, but I'm keeping it."

WSJ: For novels such as *Blood Meridian*, you did extensive historical research. What kind of research did you do for *The Road*?

CM: I don't know. Just talking to people about what things might look like under various catastrophic situations, but not a lot of research. I have these conversations on the phone with my brother Dennis, and quite often we get around to some sort of hideous end-of-the-world scenario and we always wind up just laughing. Anyone listening to this would say, "Why don't you just go home and get into a warm tub and open a vein." We talked about if there was a small percentage of the human population left, what would they do? They'd probably divide up into little tribes and when everything's gone, the only thing left to eat is each other. We know that's true historically.



John Hillcoat directed the film, which comes out Nov. 25.

WSJ: What does your brother Dennis do? Is he a scientist?

CM: He is. He has a doctorate in biology and he's also a lawyer and a thoughtful guy and a good friend.

WSJ: Brotherly conversation just turns to the apocalypse?

CM: More often than we can justify.

WSJ: What kind of reactions have you gotten to *The Road* from fathers?

CM: I have the same letter from about six different people. One from Australia, one from Germany, one from England, but they all said the same thing. They said, "I started reading your book after dinner and I finished it 3:45 the next morning, and I got up and went upstairs and I got my kids up and I just sat there in the bed and held them."

JH: Cormac, do you think we caught the spirit of the book?

CM: Yeah, absolutely. I haven't seen the final print version.

JH: Be glad you didn't have to sit through the assembly cut, which was four hours. Look, I've never made a film anywhere near two hours. I admire the films, back in the day, when they were 90 minutes.

CM: One school of thought says that directors shouldn't be allowed to edit their own films. But the truth is they should be. And they should be really brutal. Really brutal.

JH: Viewers are being hardwired differently. In film, it's harder and harder to use wide shots now. And the bigger the budget, the more closeups there are and the faster they change. It's a whole different approach. What's going to happen is there will be the two extremes: the franchise films that are now getting onto brands like Barbie, and Battleship and Ronald McDonald; then there are these incredible, very low-budget digital films. But that middle area, they just can't sustain and make it work in the current model. Maybe the model will change and hopefully readjust.

CM: Well, I don't know what of our culture is going to survive, or if we survive. If you look at the Greek plays, they're really good. And there's just a handful of them. Well, how good would they be if there were 2,500 of them? But that's the future looking back at us. Anything you can think of, there's going to be millions of them. Just the sheer number of things will devalue them. I don't care whether it's art, literature, poetry or drama, whatever. The sheer volume of it will wash it out. I mean, if you had thousands of Greek plays to read, would they be that good? I don't think so.

JH: You're absolutely right. As an example, the Toronto Film Festival is one of the biggest in film festivals. They have made it, for the first time ever, much more difficult to submit a film. They charge an entry fee and they still had 4,000 submissions just this year and they boiled that down to 300.

CM: This is just entry level to what's coming. *Just the appalling volume of artifacts will erase all meaning that they could ever possibly have.* But we probably won't get that far anyway.

JH: You got that from the horse's mouth. Did someone at the Institute give you some inside information? Can you tell us a date?

CM: For what, the end of the world? [Laughing] No, they don't have the date.

JH: Your writing, it's a form of poetry. But so much of what you read and study is technical and based in fact. Is there a line between art and science, and where does it start to blur?

CM: There's certainly an aesthetic to mathematics and science. It was one of the ways Paul Dirac got in trouble. He was one of the great physicists of the 20th century. But he really believed, as other physicists did, that given the choice between something which was logical and something which was beautiful, they would opt for the aesthetic as being more likely to be true. When [Richard]

Feynman put together his updated version of quantum electrodynamics, Dirac didn't think it was true because it was ugly. It was messy. It didn't have the clarity, the elegance, that he associated with great mathematical or physical theory. But he was wrong. There's no one formula for it.

WSJ: Is there a difference in the way humanity is portrayed in *The Road* as compared to *Blood Meridian*?

CM: There's not a lot of good guys in *Blood Meridian*, whereas good guys is what *The Road* is about. That's the subject at hand.

JH: I remember you said to me that *Blood Meridian* is about human evil, whereas *The Road* is about human goodness. It wasn't until I had my own son that I realized a personality was just innate in a person. You can see it forming. In *The Road*, the boy has been born into a world where morals and ethics are out the window, almost like a science experiment. But he is the most moral character. Do you think people start as innately good?

CM: I don't think goodness is something that you learn. If you're left adrift in the world to learn goodness from it, you would be in trouble. But people tell me from time to time that my son John is just a wonderful kid. I tell people that he is so morally superior to me that I feel foolish correcting him about things, but I've got to do something--I'm his father. There's not much you can do to try to make a child into something that he's not. But whatever he is, you can sure destroy it. Just be mean and cruel and you can destroy the best person.

WSJ: What do you and your son do together? Where do you find common ground?

CM: My feeling is that consanguinity doesn't really mean much. I have a large family and there is only one of them I feel close too, and that is my younger brother, Dennis. He's my kind of guy. I'm his kind of guy. And John's my kind of guy.



Viggo Mortensen and Kodi Smit-McPhee, who play father and son in the picture.

WSJ: You're both fathers of young children. From watching them, do you get the sense that artistic skills are passed down from parents to children?

CM: John draws all the time, but I have to say he's not very good, and I was very good. I was a child artist. A wunderkind. I did all kinds of stuff. Big showy paintings of animals. I haven't done it in years. All that stuff vanished. I never followed it up.

JH: We share that. I had severe dyslexia and drawing was my survival mechanism. I ended up having a separate career at a young age where I had stuff in the Art Gallery of Hamilton in Canada when I was very young. I was doing murals for the city.

WSJ: Really? I'm the odd man out who wasn't showing my artwork as a boy?

CM: I had shows when I was eight years old. It was just for prestige. Local art shows. I can remember some of the paintings. One of them was of a rhinoceros charging. It was kind of nice. A big watercolor, mixed media thing. Another one was really bright red, a volcano exploding. It was fun. Later on I drew birds and things like that. Nature paintings.

WSJ: Do you feel like you're trying to address the same big questions in all your work, but just in different ways?

CM: Creative work is often driven by pain. It may be that if you don't have something in the back of your head driving you nuts, you may not do anything. It's not a good arrangement. If I were God, I wouldn't have done it that way. Things I've written about are no longer of any interest to me, but they were certainly of interest before I wrote about them. So there's something about writing about it that flattens them. You've used them up. I tell people I've never read one of my books, and that's true. They think I'm pulling their leg.

WSJ: Earlier you referred to the role luck plays in life. Where has luck intervened for you?

CM: There was never a person born since Adam who's been luckier than me. Nothing has happened to me that hasn't been perfect. And I'm not being facetious. There's never been a time when I was penniless and down, when something wouldn't arrive. Over and over and over again. Enough to make you superstitious.

FATHERS AND SONS -- 'The Road' is part of a long history of films about dads and their boys. It's often the kid who does the most teaching.

The Champ (1931)

A boy named Dink (Jackie Cooper) sticks by his dad, a boozy fighter, through Tijuana boxing matches, desperate gambling and the misfortunes of their race horse Little Champ. Wallace Beery earned an Oscar as the father who insists on a final fight to redeem himself and provide for his son.



The Bicycle Thief (1948)

When the key to a poor man's livelihood, his bicycle, is stolen, he desperately tracks the culprit through Rome, shadowed by his son Bruno. Director Vittorio De Sica's intimate study of postwar poverty is a prime example of Italy's neorealist movement, which prized authentic detail over plot.



Kramer vs. Kramer (1979)

Tackling two then-daring subjects for Hollywood—divorce and single fatherhood—Dustin Hoffman played a career-obsessed dad who learns to care for his young son. His misadventures in the kitchen are played for laughs, but Mr. Hoffman's performance (and that of co-star Meryl Streep) reflected serious social shifts, resulting in a box-office smash.



Life Is Beautiful (1997)

The film opens in 1939 as Roberto Benigni's clownish Guido courts his future wife, then shifts to a concentration camp, where Guido convinces his son that their imprisonment is just part of an elaborate game. Also, the film's director, Mr. Benigni, walked a risky line between Holocaust drama and comedy, and was rewarded with multiple Oscars.



October Sky (1999)

Playing a coal miner, Chris Cooper joined a long line of overbearing celluloid fathers who oppress gifted sons, inadvertently driving them to greatness. The boy in question, Homer Hickam (Jake Gyllenhaal), was a real-life rocketry buff in West Virginia during the Sputnik scare, and grew up to be a NASA engineer.

Finding Nemo (2003)

Joe Morgenstern called the movie "a prodigy of visual energy"—but audiences also responded to a father-son story heavy on loss. A clownfish named Marlin loses his mate to a predator, then goes on a quest for his son, who's been plunked into a dentist's aquarium.