

Cormac McCarthy's Interviews in Tennessee and Kentucky, 1968–1980

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we reprint McCarthy's interviews from newspapers of East Tennessee and Lexington, Kentucky, including five newly discovered ones, all granted between 1968 and 1980, when McCarthy was still a relatively unknown author. In contrast with his usual reticence, these pieces provide candid glimpses of McCarthy's ideas about his writing. Together, they suggest that McCarthy was often willing to be interviewed when it would please his friends and neighbors. **KEYWORDS:** Cormac McCarthy, interviews, biography, comments on writing, early novels and screenplay

Cormac McCarthy has granted so few interviews in nationally distributed periodicals that journalists still often label him reclusive, although McCarthy scholars rarely do. The truth is that from the beginning of his career, McCarthy has occasionally given interviews in local newspapers, especially in locations where he lived and had friends. The earliest one we have discovered appeared in the Knoxville *News-Sentinel* in the fall of 1968, when the author was home from Europe and had published his second book, *Outer Dark*. Dianne Luce's online bibliography identifies several others in East Tennessee periodicals, and recently Zachary Turpin has discovered previously unknown interviews with McCarthy published in Lexington, Kentucky, between 1968 and 1980. This article presents all ten of them, together, for the first time.¹

Why Lexington? What connections allowed the region's newspapers access to McCarthy, while other venues were left out? The answer seems to be that McCarthy's friends from his university days facilitated these early interviews. Friends Frank and Carolyn Hare, for example, had moved to Lexington to live in Frank's family home after the death of his parents. McCarthy and his wife Anne visited them from time to time or hosted them at their own home in Louisville, Tennessee. Frank, an outgoing salesman, made it his business to know everyone, according to Carolyn, and he seems to have taken pleasure in promoting

McCarthy's career through his local contacts. He introduced McCarthy to writer and poet Guy Davenport, who was a neighbor, and this led to correspondence between the two men³ and to Davenport's reviewing *Outer Dark* in the *New York Times Book Review*. Hare also introduced McCarthy to journalist Mary Buckner, who, Anne De Lisle recalls, was very close to the Hares and possibly a relative. Buckner's three interviews with McCarthy, reproduced here, appeared in the *Lexington Herald* in 1975–1976, and she became friendly enough with Anne McCarthy that in her first interview, of March 1975, she reports visiting her in Tennessee. (At that time, Cormac may still have been in the southwest before he returned to the southeast to work with Richard Pearce on their film *The Gardener's Son*, or the two may already have convened in Tennessee and departed to do research for the film in North and South Carolina.) By late December 1979, McCarthy was living in Lexington, house-sitting until spring for a woman who wintered in Costa Rica—living arrangements facilitated by the Hares (McCarthy to Ryan). As readers will find below, a striking revelation of the interviews in the *Lexington Herald* is that in August 1980, Frank Hare was enthusiastically promoting a film adaptation of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* to be made in eastern Kentucky, with Richard Pearce as director and McCarthy as screenwriter, a project that would have built upon their collaboration for *The Gardener's Son*, but which ultimately was not funded.

The discovery of the Lexington interviews reconfigures our understanding of the circumstances under which McCarthy was willing to talk with reporters during these years. It has appeared that McCarthy declined to be interviewed for national publications until 1992, when he agreed to a lengthy interview by Richard Woodward for the *New York Times Magazine*. However, McCarthy's correspondence reveals he had tentatively agreed to two earlier profiles by friends for publications with national distribution. He allowed Robert Coles to interview him for a profile in the *New Yorker* in 1979, and initially he accepted John Fergus Ryan's profiling him for *Esquire*, although Ryan may have drawn only on their previous, private conversations for it. When *Esquire* rejected Ryan's article, McCarthy asked him not to submit it elsewhere. Neither profile was published, but McCarthy's initial cooperation suggests that he was flexible about being discussed in print when his friends were involved.³

Woodward's 1992 interview was granted at the urging of McCarthy's agent, Amanda Urban, and his Knopf editor, Gary Fisketjon, who both hoped that it would help promote *All the Pretty Horses*. Similarly, Mary Buckner's pieces for the *Lexington Herald* had been timed to arouse interest in the PBS airing of *The Gardener's Son*, in which Frank Hare had a non-speaking role, as did McCarthy himself. McCarthy also participated in an interview in the *News-Sentinel*,

reproduced below, that called attention to his Knoxville friend William Seals's role as Virgil in the film (*Gardener's Son*). Moreover, Marilyn Bailey's interview with McCarthy and Hare, also reprinted here, was designed to support Hare's fundraising efforts for a film adaptation of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* ("Writer Has Vision"). All three of these pieces foreground the film work of McCarthy's friend Richard Pearce. Thus, although he is an intensely private person, when McCarthy has considered granting interviews, an important factor has been his willingness to cooperate with friends and neighbors, especially when they were attempting to support his career or when he might support theirs. We see this too in his more recent participation in interviews about film versions of his works and in publicity for the Santa Fe Institute.

Reprinted here are the complete texts of the ten interviews we have found in Tennessee and Kentucky papers. It should be noted that in two pieces not included here also appear brief references to conversations with McCarthy. In a profile of Frank Hare for the *Lexington Herald Leader* of April 1976, Mary Buckner notes that the script of *The Gardener's Son* then bore the tentative title "Graniteville." The sole statement she attributes to McCarthy in this article is that he suggested that the tall, robust Frank Hare play the role of a mill stockholder because of his "prepossessing appearance" ("Local Man"). The *Lexington Herald* also prints Tom Buckner's review of *Outer Dark*, "Allegorical Narrative Set in Faulkner Land," in which Buckner's assessment that the novel is a dream-like parable with existential overtones seems to be informed by conversations with McCarthy.⁴ The texts we reprint below, by contrast, are devoted in full to interviewing McCarthy.

In republishing the interviews here, we have followed the wording of the texts faithfully but have altered the newspaper style in favor of that of the *Cormac McCarthy Journal*. We correct typographical errors and misspellings and eliminate insignificant typographical formatting such as bold type and nonstandard capitalization. We have also changed the newspapers' paragraph indentations to reflect the focus of the material more than column space. In the explanatory notes, we correct the journalists' occasional errors of fact and provide further identification or context for some of their references.

“Author Lives in Blount”⁵ [Knoxville (TN) *News-Sentinel*, 6 October 1968]

Outer Dark is the second novel of Cormac McCarthy, young Knoxville author who now lives with his pretty English wife⁶ on a farm at Rockford in Blount County.⁷ His first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, also won *New York Times* acclaim.⁸ “I was living up in Sevier County at the time I began writing my second novel,” said McCarthy. “I worked on it over a period of several years, some time in Asheville, and finished it in Spain.”⁹

McCarthy has been writing for about 10 years. He went to UT for a year, then was in the Air Force four years, and on returning he went to UT again. Professors liked the way he wrote and encouraged him. When he left UT he was working on his first novel and finished it in Chicago.¹⁰ He won a \$5000 fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters for a year’s travel and study abroad. He lived in Europe three years, returning less than a year ago.¹¹ It was on the boat over that he met the English girl, Anne, who became his wife. In Spain he lived on a small island, with “very friendly people,” where there was an artist colony.

McCarthy, 35, is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles J. McCarthy. The father, who retired as TVA’s chief counsel, is now practicing law in Washington. Young McCarthy is now working on a third novel. “It is still in rough draft work and is set in Knoxville,” he said.¹²

“Knox Native McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* Second Novel Gets Good Reviews,” by Pat Fields [*Knoxville Journal* (TN), 7 October 1968]

Time and place are wraithful as summer smoke—whatever that is—in Cormac McCarthy’s novel, *Outer Dark*, recently published by Random House. But the language of mountain folk is true and the key is low and broody, just as in the young author’s first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, published in 1965. Reviews in all major publications have been glowing.

That first book was judged best of its year and gained the William Faulkner Foundation Award for the literary fledgling from Knoxville. Better still, it won him the travel award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters; a chance to live and study and work in Europe or wherever, unhampered by ordinary breadwinning worries. He took his time about going. Work was still to be done on the rough draft of his second novel.¹³ He sailed, with the draft and notes and portable typewriter making up a large part of his luggage. And on the ship as an



Fig. 1 Cormac McCarthy and his wife Anne, at home. *Knoxville Journal*, 7 October 1968.

entertainer was a lovely young English singer named Anne, darkhaired and darkeyed and smiling.

"No, I didn't know about his book. *The Orchard Keeper* had not yet got to England," said Anne, who was born and reared in Southampton. "He sent me a copy, autographed by his publisher's secretary.¹⁴ Next time I saw him I told him what beautiful handwriting he had." The story of Cormac and Anne can only be capsuled and there's nothing low key or broody about it. They were married. They lived for a year on a very small island off Spain near Majorca.¹⁵ They traveled over much of Europe and lived in Paris and London for long periods.

Last December they came back to the US, just as

Cormac's parents were pulling up stakes in Knoxville (his father was a lawyer with TVA here) and settling in Washington, DC.

The young McCarthys came on to Knoxville. This had been Cormac's home since he was four and the family moved here from Rhode Island. Since February they have been living in Rockford, in a tidy little house on a secluded farm. Cormac's novel, *Outer Dark*, had been "rewritten three or four times" during the Europe travels and sent to the publisher the summer before. Another novel was begging to be written.

No need to ask Cormac McCarthy what his new novel is about. He can be elusive as smoke himself about such things. But chances are it will again be keyed to the gloomy forebodings, the melancholy beauty and the not-in-this-world-wait'll-the-next life yearnings of the mountain people he loves and has delineated so well in the first two.

He writes long hours, as any good writer must, and when he's free there are mountains and valleys to roam in with Anne, who seems to miss not at all the way of life she left behind. "We had a garden and I've been pickling," she said, pointing to orderly rows of jars on a kitchen shelf. "I made some lemon curd; most Americans wouldn't know what it is."

"It's good, something like marmalade," explained her husband.

"But with eggs and other things," Anne added. "Anyway, I can sing to him and cook for him. What more would he want! There's not much else to do here, but I love it."

They won't be around for much longer, perhaps just until this book is lined out. "We want to go to Mexico and then back to Europe for awhile . . ."

"Writer Visits Fayette:¹⁶ Recognition Acceptable, Says Author McCarthy," by Blithe Runsdorf [*Lexington Herald-Leader* (KY), 27 November 1968]

[A photo of McCarthy, his wife Anne, and friend Frank Hare originally appeared with this article.]

How does it feel to have your first novel acclaimed by critics and welcomed with the Faulkner Foundation award? And then to repeat the promise of the first novel with rave reviews of a second? "It's very acceptable to be recognized in your own lifetime," said Cormac McCarthy, author of *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), and *Outer Dark*, who is visiting the Blue Grass, "but I'm doing what I wanted to do, and do not think about awards much." McCarthy and his wife have given some thought to buying a Blue Grass home.

McCarthy, at 35, is probably [a]typical¹⁷ of his generation of writers who are more concerned with social commentary than creative development. He is interested in some permanence and longevity in his work. "Literature by definition," he said, "lasts. I don't think it's literature if it's simply what's wrong with society."

What It's Like

Profoundly influenced by Hemingway, Faulkner, Melville and Joyce, he is, like most authors, "trying to say what the world is about . . . what it's like." But, while the urban life is now of heavy influence, McCarthy writes against a rural, backwoods tapestry.

"I find it difficult to write about a generalized city environment," he said, "because it is hard to turn up idiosyncratic people in a city . . . all city characters

tend to come out alike on paper.” It is this “sense of community” that he finds in his home in the Blue Grass region. “There is still a coherent society there,” he said.

His Job

McCarthy works at his writing like most men work at any job—except that he does not punch a clock. “I work about four or five hours a day,” he said.

His wife, the former Anne De Lisle, from Hamble, England, takes no credit as a muse, but does admit to typing his manuscripts. “Cormac just shuts himself up in his room and writes,” said the former dancer and singer, who met her husband on a Cunard ocean liner crossing to England while she was an entertainer on board.

McCarthy’s works have been termed “experimental” by most critics but he thinks that can be said of most serious writers. “Any serious writer is experimental in that he’s trying to do something new or better.” A serious writer, he adds, sits down and begins to write and develop the story as he goes along. “He doesn’t just sit down and 70,000 or 80,000 words come full blown into his head.” He suggests that anyone who intends to write “read to know what’s been written before—both good and bad.” This point complements the theory of author as experimenter, for, as McCarthy said, “you will see things in other writers you admire and that you think you can do better.”

The author, who has always wanted to be a writer, received a general liberal arts education at the University of Tennessee where several professors encouraged him to pursue his ambition. He served in the Air Force for four years between 1953–57 but discounts it as potential creative material as being “too grim an experience.”

McCarthy does not identify with this generation of novelists, although he does share some of their feeling of alienation. “Any artist is outside the mainstream of society . . . they just don’t fit in well with American society and I doubt it’s getting better.” This does not mean that the situation is better anywhere else. “In Europe,” he said, “an artist may be more secure, but since I’m not European I don’t feel any more comfortable there.”

His next novel is still more than two years from completion and apparently has no definite shape yet.

McCarthy is the recipient of two Ingram Merrill Creative Writing Awards, was a 1965 traveling fellow with the American Academy of Arts and Letters and received the Rockefeller Foundation grant for 1966–68.

“Just Write’ Says Successful Author,” by Richard Jordan
[*University of Tennessee Daily Beacon*, 28 January 1969]

A former UT student, who wrote short stories for *The Phoenix*,¹⁸ has made the considerable jump to published novelist—to the praise of reviewers across the nation. The writer is Cormac McCarthy, whose novels are *The Orchard Keeper* and *Outer Dark*. McCarthy and his wife, a pretty English girl, live in a book-filled home in Rockford, near Knoxville. “I’ve lived in Europe and in all 50 states,” the modest and quiet-mannered author said. “I like this area. I like living here and I think it’s a good place to do my writing.”

McCarthy is originally from Rhode Island; his family moved to Knoxville when he was four. After high school here, McCarthy studied a year at UT, leaving the following year to travel. He enlisted in the Air Force in 1953 and served two of his four years in Alaska. After his discharge, McCarthy resumed his studies at UT, but left without taking a degree. While he was a

student here, McCarthy wrote short stories for the *Phoenix*, UT’s literary quarterly.

New York’s Random House published *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy’s first novel, in 1965. The novel brought its author a Rockefeller Foundation grant, a grant for travel from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the William Faulkner Foundation Award. In *Harper’s* magazine and *Saturday Review*, *The Orchard Keeper* was praised by such critics as Granville Hicks¹⁹ and Robert Penn Warren.²⁰ Random House also published *Outer Dark* in September. In a roundup of some of the books of the year, *Life* wrote that this novel was unsurpassed for its “sheer concentration.”²¹ *Time* called it a “profound parable.”²²

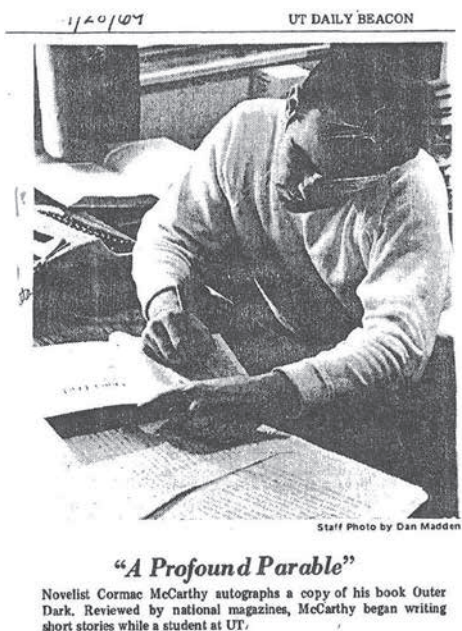


Fig. 2 McCarthy autographing copies of *Outer Dark*.
UT Daily Beacon, 28 July 1968.

Both novels are stories of the rural South. The writer is currently at work on a novel set in Knoxville.

"I get letters sometimes from people who say they want to write," the boyish-looking author said. "I tell them, if you think you want to write, then just start writing."

"Practical advice, I believe, would be to read. You have to know what's been done. And you have to understand it. I like the gutsy writers—Dostoyevski, Tolstoy, Joyce, Faulkner. I like Melville, particularly, and, more recently, Flannery O'Connor. She has a wonderful sense of the macabre."

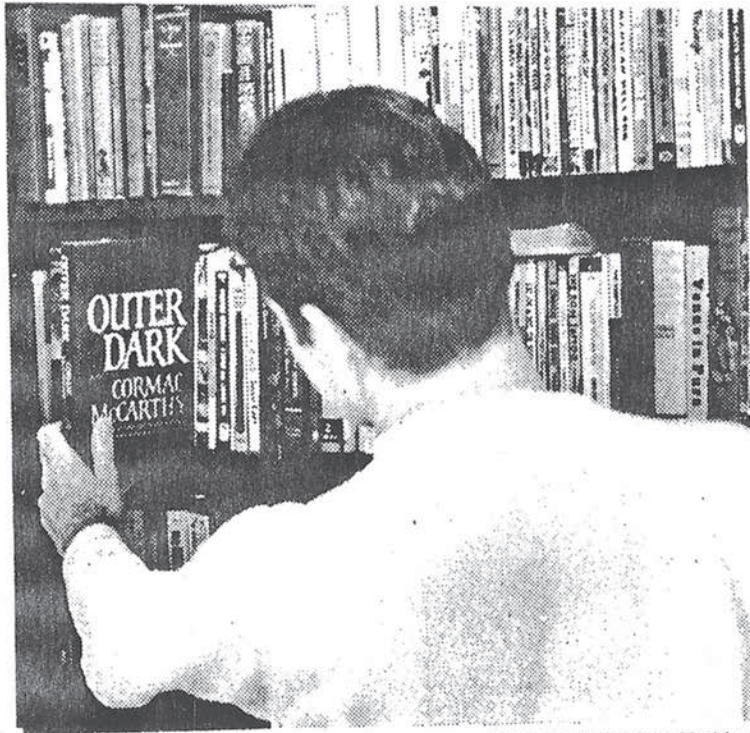
Asked what he thought of his critical reception, McCarthy smiled and said, "I like the good words, but I write for the same reason any writer does: I want to be read."

"McCarthy Is One of Nation's Most Remarkable Young Authors,"
by Mark Owen, Staff Writer [*Maryville-Alcoa Times* (TN), 28
February 1971]

In the bedroom of a home he is laboriously, meticulously building, one of the nation's most widely remarked young authors is writing his third book. His life, like his books, is something entirely his own. The home was once a one-story block dairy barn, located near a loosely graveled road a half mile beyond other signs of civilization in Lakewood Addition, along Louisville Road. Few Blount Countians are aware that anyone is living in the old barn. Even fewer know the owner has carefully, almost word by word, handcrafted two of the most remarkable novels to come out of the South since William Faulkner was at his peak. Cormac McCarthy says "Fortunately no one knows I'm here. I enjoy anonymity."

Visiting him at his relatively lonely retreat immediately calls to mind his books, *The Orchard Keeper* and *Outer Dark*. They are dark, gripping tales of the rural South, peopled by characters driven by the fates of old which they are incapable of fathoming. His new book, in which much of the action will be in Knoxville,²³ is a departure from the first two. "It's going to be a city book," the author remarks. He estimates it is still between one and two years from completion. He tries to write something every day, but has set himself no quota. The book will be completed with no consideration other than its quality determining the pace of writing, McCarthy implies, because his "only personal goal is to write well. That's the point around which everything else revolves."

That he is succeeding is confirmed by the manner in which his first two novels have been accepted. He began *The Orchard Keeper* while still an undergraduate



Staff Photo by Dan Madden

I Want to be Read

Few writers McCarthy's age are able to go to their book shelf to see their own works actually printed. Unlike many authors, he has been successful from the beginning.

Fig. 3 McCarthy looking at a copy of *Outer Dark*. *UT Daily Beacon*, 28 July 1968.

at the University of Tennessee, spending three years writing it, then, as he recalls "arguing with my editor and the publishers" for two more years before the book was published in 1965. It was welcomed by strongly laudatory reviews and won for McCarthy the William Faulkner Foundation Award, a Rockefeller Foundation Grant and a traveling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The latter award, meant to provide promising young artists an opportunity to travel and gather experiences to further their skills, is like many other facts of modern life that McCarthy takes only half seriously. He recalls now that the academy "gave me some money and told me to go away." Consequently, he got on a boat headed for Europe for what was to be an unusually eventful trip. He finished his second novel in Spain. Equally important, he

met a young English girl on the ship and later married her in England. In 1967 McCarthy and his new bride, Anne, came back to the United States and moved into a small house on Self Hollow Road, where they lived until less than a year ago. *Outer Dark* was published in 1968 and it too received exceptional reviews and won another fellowship for its author, this time from the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.²⁴

The Faulkner Foundation award seems particularly significant if only because McCarthy's books have something of the same ring to them that Faulkner's have. The similarity of subject matter alone is not enough to create the likeness. It is, rather, the ability of both writers to recall with frightening reality the hopeless, sometime aimless lives of poor rural southerners of a bygone era. A reader of either author, while naturally aware of the technical narrative skill of both men, is more aware of the overall effect of that skill, the ability to paint with words an all-encompassing mood. It would seem impossible to read McCarthy's books without feeling a tinge of the hopelessness of his characters.

The colors from McCarthy's literary palette are nearly all dark, earthy hues. His characters are stoically independent, unconsciously uncivilized, frequently sinister and overpowering, seldom happy. One reviewer, Melvin Maddocks, writing in the Dec. 20, 1968, issue of *Life Magazine* calls McCarthy's style a "superbly crafted prose—Faulkner whittled in hard hickory." The same reviewer, ruminating on a year that produced 30,000 books by American authors, indicates the year produced a few "masterpieces." Foremost among the several mentioned is *Outer Dark*, which Maddocks calls "a minor classic of American Gothic." Other book critics are equally enthusiastic about McCarthy's work. In September of 1968 a *Time* magazine critic wrote of *Outer Dark*: "His (McCarthy's) is an Irish singing voice imbued with Southern Biblical intonations. The result is an antiphony of speech played against a landscape of penance . . . his simple narrative with its suspenseful qualities becomes a profound parable that ultimately speaks to any society in any time."

The critic may or may not have known McCarthy's background, but the description is apt. Born in 1933 in Providence, RI, he is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles McCarthy. His first name is that of a historically important King of Ireland. The McCarthys moved to south Knox County when Cormac was still little more than an infant. His father eventually became chief legal counsel for Tennessee Valley Authority before retiring early to enter a private law firm in Washington, DC. His parents' decision to move south was to have a significant influence on McCarthy's writing career. His first book chronicles events set in Blount and Knox counties and what is now great Smoky Mountains National Park. It takes place in the late 1930s and early 40s, a period McCarthy recalls as

“a time of transition, before television and other mass media had a leveling effect on people. It’s difficult for people today to realize life like it was then. I remember knowing someone with a car—that was really unusual.”

That first book is, in many ways, an epitaph to a breed of fiercely proud mountain people who have disappeared in less than a generation. *Outer Dark*, McCarthy’s second book, is not so specifically located either geographically or chronologically. It might be about people almost anywhere in the South 50 or more years ago. Robert Coles, writing for the March 1969 issue of *New Yorker*, chose to see a great deal more to *Outer Dark* than just a tale of life in the Old South.²⁵ Instead, he considers it a gothic morality play whose characters’ “origins don’t have to be expressed and related to society or ‘the culture.’ They are immediately presented as people larger than life, important for reasons everyone can sense. One person commits a crime against the gods, then others are drawn into a series of accidents, misfortunes, and, finally, disasters, all of which make for a tragedy whose meaning every reader had better comprehend.” The book, Coles contends, offers a deep moral message to all who read it. Few, he feels, will heed the warning.

Students of American literature who delight in delving into the background of authors and weaving what they find into some sort of fabric to explain that author’s style and deepest held convictions, would find Cormac McCarthy extremely disconcerting. He fits no mold and possesses a disarming wit. He is not openly cynical about life, as his books might suggest, nor is he morose or sinister in the manner of so many of his characters. He admits many people who have read and admired his books are stunned to meet him. “Possibly, I’m just completely schizoid,” he suggests by way of explanation.

He does not talk in the convoluted sentences full of obscure words which are so frequent in his books. Humor, almost totally absent in his books, seems to lurk just below the surface in his conversation. Unlike his characters, he seems relaxed and content with his lot in life. Apparently he has always been that way. For instance, he chose to take from school only what interested him. He attended parochial schools in Knoxville, including Catholic High, and now looks back on those days with the wry observation that “every school I went to was pulled down behind me—a fitting monument.”²⁶

He attended the University of Tennessee for a year, then enlisted in the U.S. Air Force for four years. Returning to UT, he left in 1959 without earning a degree.²⁷ He had not completed language requirements for the degree, but felt he did not need it. By then he was already writing *The Orchard Keeper* and he went to Chicago, where, for a year, he was a manual laborer, “the only real job” he ever had. He has been writing ever since.

He first decided to write, McCarthy remembers, “shortly after I learned the letters of the alphabet.” He started a book when he was eight years old, but abandoned it after 15 or 20 pages. “It took me another 20 years to get around to writing again,” he adds. He writes “maybe simply, because I can do it. I don’t write to make money. There are a lot of easier ways to make money. I could sell tickets to people and let them watch while I was run over by a truck.” Such a statement is as close to humor as McCarthy comes when speaking of his work.



Blount author at writing desk

Cormac McCarthy, Rt. 2, Louisville, is slowly creating his third novel at this desk in his home. First two novels, published to lavish critical-acclaim, have sold moderately well and McCarthy has been approached about selling film options

on both books.

He has no target completion date for third, as yet untitled book, but indicates he will write it only as quickly as he can, while still maintaining same quality as in first two efforts.

Fig. 4 McCarthy at his writing desk. *Maryville-Alcoa Times*, 26 February 1971.

Yet, while he is thoroughly dedicated to writing well, he implies that he takes little else in life seriously, himself included. Unlike his readers, he does not see a bridge between himself and his life style and his books. Pleased that his books impress people, he seems only amused when people try to impute some genius to the author of the books.

There is for McCarthy, unlike many other writers, no conflict between being an artist and being a breadwinner. "I could write sex books for money," he suggests. "I guess I could write a book like that (a potboiler) in about 30 days. In the 10 years I have been a writer that would be 120 books and surely one of them would have been a best seller." But he is not interested in either "sex books" or money. What he is interested in, he claims, is happiness. "I've always been horrified by the way people live their lives. I'm basically very selfish and want to enjoy life. I always have a good time." To many of the people who have read his books, McCarthy's idea of "a good time" might seem to border on insanity. His "good time" is a combination of laboriously writing his third book, reading (he has more than 1,500 books, ranging from modern novels to the collected works of Greek playwrights), and building, with his wife, what may be one of the most unique homes in Blount County when it is completed.

About 18 months ago the McCarthys began looking for a large old house to remodel. They never found what they wanted, but the author did find an abandoned dairy barn, sitting on the corner of an 11-acre tract that he liked. Mrs. McCarthy recalls, "I told him I thought it was wonderful—I never thought he'd buy it." It is now their home. The dairy barn-house, and the method in which it is being transformed, perhaps reveals more about McCarthy's character than anything he says. He and his wife are doing all the work themselves because, the author claims, the couple couldn't hire someone to do the work if they wanted to. "Nobody would be crazy enough to build a house like this." So they are building it themselves and in so doing displaying the independence McCarthy admits is a dominant factor in his personality. "My ideal," he says, "would be to be completely independent. If I could, I'd have a small mill to generate our electricity. But you have to compromise. On one hand there is a nine-to-five job you don't like and a totally artificial life. At the other end is the life of a hermit. But I don't want to be cut off from society and have to make some compromise." Building his own house, he implies, is one of the beneficial parts of such a compromise. "It gives me a certain amount of pleasure: I've always been interested in architectural design and it gives me something to do in my spare time."

When they bought the old barn, which was nothing more than a cinder block shell on a concrete slab, the McCarthys had only the barest rudiments of a house. Now, slowly, they are transforming the old building. McCarthy, who has

never had any formal training in any of the building trades, has read more than enough to allow him to undertake the job. He and his wife have scoured their own property and many others for field stone, old roofing slates and old brick from collapsed houses and chimneys. They have gone to auctions and junkyards to pick up stained glass windows, old furniture and the stainless steel tub out of a washing machine which they quickly converted into a cavernous kitchen sink. The entire house, when finished, will reflect the couple's love for the outdoors. Many walls will be carefully fitted field stone. Others, along with ceilings, will be of rough sawn planks acquired at a nearby sawmill. The main fireplace in the house will have as its hearth a single, immense slab of rock, weighing nearly a ton, which they had carted to the site on a septic tank truck. Old roofing slates have been used to make slate inlaid floors. All of the work has required McCarthy to develop the skills of, among others, plumber, carpenter, stone mason, bricklayer, glazier, electrician, plasterer and millwright. Nonetheless, his approach to his pastime is typical of his outlook on life. The house, McCarthy says, "is all built of refuse and rubble."

Like the new book, he makes no estimate of a completion date for the house. Nor does he particularly seem to care. For the moment, at least, he is happy. "I might do something else tomorrow," he claims. But, until that tomorrow comes, he will continue to write, slowly, painstakingly, in the spirit of artists before him. Those who have read and enjoyed his first two books can only hope that particular "tomorrow" does not come.

"East Tennessee Author Talks About His Works and His Life,"
by Martha Byrd [*Kingsport Times-News* (TN), 16 December 1973]

East Tennessee has a reputation for breathtaking scenery, mountain laurel and moonshine. It also produces top-notch novelists like Cormac McCarthy, and with his third book, *Child of God*, McCarthy gives us a picture of East Tennessee both strange and familiar. The secret of its strength lies in McCarthy himself—his feelings about his subject and the particular approach he takes to his writing.

The approach to writing was the theme of a conversation with McCarthy when *Child of God* was released in December. Obviously amused at my questions, the mustachioed, suede-suited novelist settled back in his swivel chair, grey eyes dancing, to try to explain to the historian how the novelist plies his craft. "I don't analyze it, it is just something I do. . . . You write about something you know very well. . . . If you haven't experienced it, you can't write about it. . . ."

Gradually, a philosophy seemed to emerge. Living is experience, and experience for the novelist translates into words. “Writing is a compulsion,” McCarthy said. An idea may germinate a long time. *Child of God* began ten years ago, when McCarthy lived in Sevier County.²⁸ Far from keeping a writer’s notebook, McCarthy prefers not to write—or even talk—about an idea until he is sure what he wants to do with it. “When you write something down you pretty well kill it,” he said. “Leave it loose and knocking around up there and you never know—it might turn into something.”

While a new novel is still in the knocking-around stage, are there things a novelist can do to develop it, to help it germinate? In other words, a kind of research toward a novel? McCarthy’s perennial grin changed to delighted laughter. “Would you like to rephrase the question!” I tried again, but no, apparently the novel and the history book are polar extremes, not only in conception but in the writing process itself. McCarthy says that once he is ready to write, the words come easily and quickly. “I go into a state of mind. . . . My hands do the thinking . . . It is not a conscious process . . .”

Creativity is an elusive thing to pin down; but McCarthy finally made his point with a parable. While living in Spain some years ago, he had a novelist friend, “a kindred soul, a madman.” This friend was in a bar, where companions were quizzing him. “Where do you get your ideas?” While the conversation was taking place, only the novelist was paying any attention to a dwarf who was crawling along the top of the bar, methodically draining the abandoned mugs of their last dregs of beer. . . . “I can’t explain how one creates a novel,” McCarthy mused. “It’s like jazz. They create as they play, and maybe only those who can do it can understand it.”

Child of God (Random House) focuses on a strange man, a native of the East Tennessee mountains, and one of society’s misfits.

“The Writer’s Writer: Self-Satisfaction Novelist’s Goal,” by Mary Buckner [*Lexington Herald-Leader* (KY), 2 March 1975]

Why does a man write novels for a living? Novelist Cormac McCarthy says, with tongue in cheek, “I write because I found I wasn’t very good at anything else.” McCarthy is a fine young writer who has written three critically acclaimed novels—*The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*.

Taking time to visit with friends Frank C. Hare and his wife, Carolyn, here on his way to New York for a meeting with his editor,²⁹ this 41-year-old Knoxville native has spent the last year in the Southwest gathering information

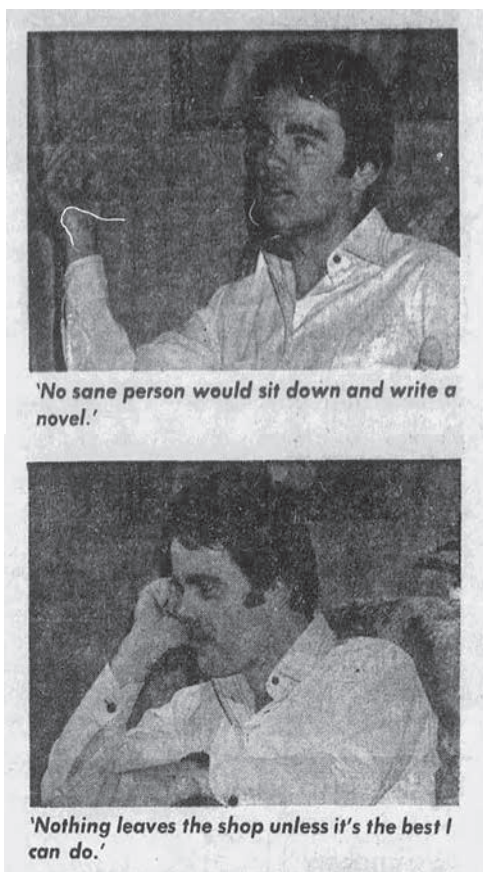


Fig. 5a Photos of Cormac McCarthy, by Frank Anderson. *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 2 March 1975.

for a new book.³⁰ McCarthy says most “full time” novelists would probably do something else if they could. “No sane person,” he says, “would sit down and write a novel.” Writers do have a stereotyped reputation of being odd, and McCarthy says, “I suppose most of us are. Most I know are pretty obnoxious. I have yet to meet any I like. Besides, we crackpots shouldn’t be in responsible jobs.”

Even though he feels some writers can be a bit eccentric sometimes, he still professes an admiration for “all the good authors, such as Shakespeare, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Henry Miller.” Personal reading habits of a writer can be intriguing sometimes and this dark-haired writer has his own formula. “I don’t read bad books,” he says. “I can’t physically make my eyes move across the page.”

Not all authors are interested in achieving “best seller” status. Personally, Cormac McCarthy writes for self satisfaction. “I don’t give a damn what other people think.” As for the public, “they can sink or swim.”

Critics have found his books to be outstanding. *The National Observer* said of his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), “This novel is so remarkably fine that it is difficult to convey its full distinction in a review.”³¹ “No American novel this year can surpass it,” was *Life Magazine’s* tribute to his second novel, *Outer Dark* (1969).³² His third book, *Child of God*, (1971) received excellent reviews in all major newspapers and magazines. McCarthy has received only one bad review that he’s aware of. “It wasn’t just an unfavorable review,” he says. “The guy hated the book—but it’s my favorite review.”



Fig. 5b Photos of Cormac McCarthy, by Frank Anderson. *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 2 March 1975.

McCarthy writes about people—odd people and sordid human conditions. “The odd ones are more interesting,” he says. But, he treats these oddities with dignity and humor. Many authors feel that in order to write a good story it is necessary for the author to experience directly the things he is writing about. But what about this writer? Just where do Cormac McCarthy’s ideas originate? McCarthy is provoked. “They come from people. Creativity isn’t the idea, but what you do with it.” He quotes James Joyce as once saying, “Isn’t it marvelous what I can do with the simplest things.”

McCarthy is extremely personable, almost beguiling. He has the ability to tell a good story with humor and never assumes that “untouchable” status that some authors seem to have. In fact, just like many of us, McCarthy says what he likes to do most is stay in bed. “Somedays I get my books and typewriter and just stay there all day—or even a couple of days.”

He makes light of his ability, but actually he is a very serious writer. “I try to write as well as I can,” he says. “Nothing leaves the shop unless it’s the best

I can do.” His efforts haven’t gone unrewarded. In 1965 he was awarded the Travelling Fellowship of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the William Faulkner Foundation Award. He spent 1966–68 in Spain and France on a Rockefeller Foundation Grant. Additional honors came in 1969 when he received a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Although McCarthy claims writing is his only talent, his creativity can be found in other media. On a recent visit to Louisville, Tenn., which is close to Knoxville, this reporter was a guest of his wife in their unique home—a house that McCarthy had built by hand from native stone, slate and barn siding.

McCarthy’s latest novel, about life in Knoxville in the fifties, is in the final editing stages and should be published in about a year. It has no title yet. “Titles don’t suggest themselves,” he says. “Gradually the least obnoxious one comes out.”

“Cornered,” by Mary Buckner [*Lexington Herald-Leader* (KY), 2 September 1975]

Cormac McCarthy tells of his friend, the con man of all con men. Back in the old days his buddy was one of those guys who walks up and down the street taking pictures of people and trying to sell them for a quarter. One particular Friday, the guy was in a hurry to meet his cronies at a local bar, but he hadn’t had a good day, profit wise. One more taker would give him enough to have a worthwhile evening. He spotted a likely taker, shot the photo, and began his sales pitch. He looked down at the developing picture and realized it was overexposed.

Undaunted, he rumbled down in his camera bag and drew out the picture of a man who hadn’t bought his act. He quickly exchanged the picture for a quarter and sped away. Half a block later the buyer caught up with him, saying, “Hey, this isn’t me.”

The con artist replied, “But my friend, I see a great resemblance.”

The sucker answered, “But this guy is wearing a hat.”

“But my friend,” said the con man, “you look striking in a hat.”³³

“*Gardener’s Son* on PBS This Week, Written by Louisvillian”
[*Knoxville News-Sentinel* (TN), 2 January 1977]

The Gardener’s Son, a two-hour dramatic film to be aired as part of the PBS “Visions” series on WSJK-TV, Channel 2, at 9 p.m. Thursday and again at 10 p.m. Saturday, was written by Cormac McCarthy, a novelist who lives on a farm

at Louisville, Tenn, and William Seals, a Knoxville native who graduated from Rule High School in 1955, plays the role of a sheriff in the film. Seals is the son of J. W. Seals of 3122 Brunswick St.

While McCarthy has written three novels—*Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *The Orchard Keeper*, all of which won him critical acclaim and a large readership—*The Gardener's Son* is his first attempt at writing a screenplay. It is based on a real event—the murder of a rich mill owner by a poor white boy—and is told in the context of the social order and moral code that existed in a small Southern town 100 years ago.³⁴ The killing apparently took place for no reason, at least no single, clearly-defined reason, but obviously occurred because of a multiplicity of intertwined ideas and relationships that took their toll on the boy who was to become a murderer.

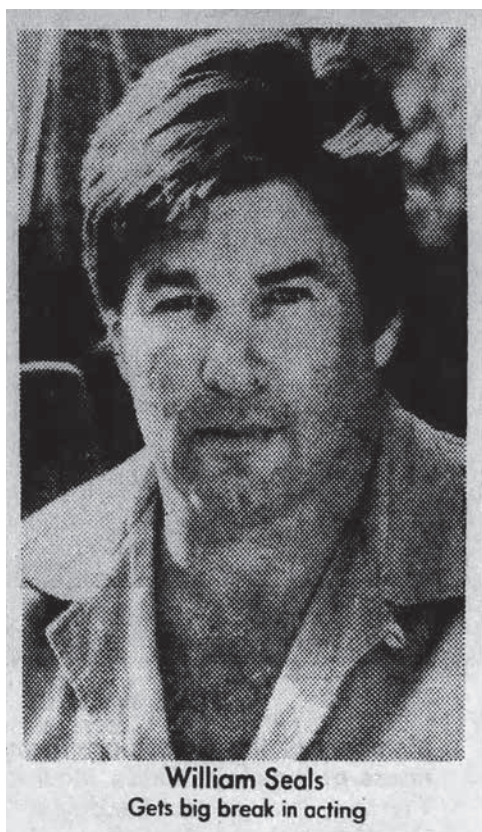


Fig. 6 William Seals, a Knoxville native who appeared in *The Gardener's Son*. [Knoxville News-Sentinel, 2 January 1977]

[An early portrait of McCarthy, captioned “An old picture,” appears approximately here in the original.]

“The McEvoy, the poor family whose son, Robert (portrayed by Brad Dourif), killed the mill owner, Gregg (played by Kevin Conway), were Irish Catholics living in a Southern town, like my family was,” McCarthy said. “Everyone else was Methodist or Baptist. Robert McEvoy grows up being a black sheep, the bad boy of the town. That was familiar to me, too. The kid was a natural rebel, probably just a troublemaker in real life. But in our film he has a certain nobility. He stands up and says, ‘No, this is intolerable and I want to do something about it!’”

McCarthy was born 44 years ago in Providence, R.I.,

but grew up in Louisville.³⁵ He attended the University of Tennessee for four years on the G.I. Bill,³⁶ but dropped out to write his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, published in 1965 by Random House.

"I don't know why I started writing," he said laconically. "I don't know why anybody does it. Maybe they're bored, or failures at something else. Look at Spiro Agnew.³⁷ He's now a novelist." Nevertheless, McCarthy said life could have been grimmer. "I've had fellowships and scholarships to help me eke out a living as a writer. I find when I'm really comfortable and have a little money, I tend to relax too much—whereas when my feet are in the fire I tend to get up early and go to work."

McCarthy has been the recipient of a William Faulkner Foundation Award, a travelling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Rockefeller Foundation grant, and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Richard Pearce, director of the film and the person who asked McCarthy to write it, said McCarthy "was as intimately involved in the project as a writer can be. When I was casting bits and extras he came along. We saw over 1000 people throughout the State of South Carolina and he came to every session." For his part, McCarthy admitted he "wanted to see what films were all about. It's back-breaking work. On location for 30 days, and the last week we were working 16 to 18 hours a day. You've got to be some kind of weirdo to think that it's fun. But it sure kept my interest up—and writers are basically pretty lazy people."

The Gardener's Son also provided a break for Seals, who was recommended for a part by McCarthy. Seals' role as Virgil, a sheriff who befriends Robert McEvoy after he is indicted for murder, is his largest role in a major film. He has appeared in episodes of such TV shows as "Alice" and "One Day at a Time." Seals said that following his performance in "The Gardener's Son," he has been busy answering calls from directors and producers interested in offering him roles.

Others in the film include Nan Martin as Mrs. Gregg, Jerry Hardin as Patrick McEvoy, Anne O'Sullivan as Martha McEvoy, and Penny Allen as Mrs. McEvoy.

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"Writer Has a Vision of Faulkner on Film," by Marilyn Bailey,
Leader staff writer [*Lexington Herald-Leader* (KY), 8 August
1980]

A rough-hewn pine coffin floats down a Kentucky river. The coffin, carrying a dead woman's body, has holes drilled in it because the woman's dim-witted son³⁸ thinks that it will help her breathe better. Right now, this scene exists only on the pages of a William Faulkner novel—and the mind of writer Cormac McCarthy who—if he has his way, will turn it into a feature length film, perfectly suited to Kentucky's backwoods and often wild and swollen rivers.

As *I Lay Dying*, a novel written by Faulkner in 1930, is about the blundering efforts of the Bundren family to take their dead mother's body from their backwoods home to town for burial.³⁹ It is a tragic but oftentimes comic story. It borders on the grotesque as the family fords a swollen river and the casket slips from the wagon bed and begins floating down the river.

"This is one of Faulkner's books that I think would lend itself greatly to film," says McCarthy. "Movies are often memorable for a few scenes and I believe *As I Lay Dying* would have great cinematic appeal."

An Electrifying Idea

The idea of bringing the movie to Kentucky is in its infancy; McCarthy and Lexington businessman Frank Hare have just begun to explore the possibilities of making the movie in Eastern Kentucky; they've talked with the Kentucky Film Commission. "I think the whole idea is electrifying," says Hare, who will represent McCarthy and director Richard Pearce in trying to raise the money to make the movie. "It's not often that you get the opportunity to make a movie from a classic book like this," says Hare.

Faulkner won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949 and has been recognized as one of America's finest writers. Most of Faulkner's works portray life in the deep South and some of the insistent problems of human consciousness. Several other Faulkner books have been made into movies, such as *Requiem for a Nun*, *Pylon*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *The Reivers*, *Sanctuary* and *The Hamlet*, which was retitled *The Long Hot Summer* starring Paul Newman. Faulkner makes great demands on his reader and much of this writing is often in the form of stream of consciousness and multiple narrators. *As I Lay Dying* is told from 15 different characters' points of view.

The screenplay seems a natural for McCarthy, who won the William Faulkner Foundation award in 1965. McCarthy, whom a literary review called one of the most talented writers in the South since World War II, has written four books, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1974)⁴⁰ and *Suttree*



Fig. 7 Cormac McCarthy and Lexington businessman Frank Hare. They wanted to make a film based on William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* in Eastern Kentucky.

(1979). He has won one Rockefeller and two Guggenheim awards. He wrote the original screenplay for *The Gardener's Son*, a work produced for the *Visions* series on public television. *The Village Voice* named it one the year's best in 1977.⁴¹ McCarthy, 47, was reared in Tennessee and attended the University of Tennessee where he met Hare and his wife. He now lives in Tucson, but visits Lexington frequently.

Although the sales of his books have been what Random House calls "disappointing," critically they have done very well. *Child of God*, McCarthy's novel about what he terms "a man who develops a fondness for dead people," has probably drawn the most comments. "About six months after the book came out, I had gone to New York to talk with my editor, Albert Erskine—(who was also Faulkner's editor). He was introducing me to some people there and they were all giving me these weird looks. One woman came up to me and said, "That's the strangest book I've ever read," says McCarthy.

Although the film rights to *As I Lay Dying* have not been purchased yet, McCarthy says that he and Dick Pearce have a verbal commitment for the rights from the Harold Ober Associates, Faulkner's representatives. Although the firm has had other requests for the book, they were convinced the book would be treated with the proper respect by the pair.

Pearce, a Louisville native, won an Oscar for his film *Hearts and Minds*, a documentary about the Vietnam War. He also won the grand prize at the Berlin Film Festival this year for his film *Heartland*, a movie starring Rip Torn which has not been released yet.

Wanted: \$1.25 Million

The plans for the movie include a \$1.25 million budget to begin production in March of 1981, if money becomes available. As the film is planned now, it will be a movie for television, possibly to be released to theaters later on, says McCarthy.

"I can't imagine not being able to sell this movie in Kentucky," says Hare. "It's really a prestigious project that would be perfectly filmed in Eastern Kentucky. It's strictly a blue chip project." Unlike the case of major film companies, financing for independent productions is often hard to secure. *Steel*,⁴² a movie filmed entirely in Lexington and now showing at Lexington theaters, was an independently produced movie in which its star, Lee Majors, invested heavily.

The Kentucky Film Commission, which offers movie producers a range of services, doesn't offer any financial assistance. According to Olivia Maggard, film commission executive director, the commission's \$140,000 budget does not allow it to speculate on film ventures. The commission's purpose is to act primarily as a clearing house for production companies, to scout locations and serve as an information conduit for productions. "We watch all the trade magazines and look for who's bought the rights to books that might be appropriately made in this area," says Ms. Maggard.

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DIANNE C. LUCE holds Emerita status from Midlands Technical College. She is a founder and past-President of the Cormac McCarthy Society. Her books

include *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* (U of South Carolina P, 2009), and *Embracing Vocation: Cormac McCarthy's Writing Life, 1959–1974* (U of South Carolina P, forthcoming), as well as two collections of articles about McCarthy, co-edited with Edwin T. Arnold.

NOTES

1. All but one of the interviews reproduced here were published in US periodicals prior to 1978, each without any visible or registered copyright notice, and are therefore in the public domain. The sole exception is “*Gardener’s Son*, on PBS This Week, Written by Louisvillian” (*Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 2 January 1977), which is reproduced here with the permission of the USA TODAY NETWORK.

2. McCarthy’s side of this correspondence is preserved in the Guy Davenport Papers, MS-4979, Harry Ransom Center, U of Texas, Austin.

3. For background information about these profiles, especially the one proposed by Robert Coles, see Luce, “Robert Coles,” 229–231.

4. Anne De Lisle does not recall whether Tom Buckner was related to Mary Buckner, but she does remember that Mary Buckner had a husband.

5. This interview accompanies a reprint of Thomas Lask’s review of *Outer Dark* from the *New York Times*, omitted here: “Imaginative Work Perfectly Executed.” *Knoxville (TN) News-Sentinel*, 6 October 1968, F-5. Online, via Newspapers.com. Accessed 18 March 2022. <http://www.newspapers.com/image/773619681/>.

6. Anne De Lisle McCarthy, who was McCarthy’s second wife.

7. This was the rented pig farm where they lived until McCarthy bought property on Light Pink Road and converted its dairy barn to a home.

8. The novel was reviewed appreciatively in Orville Prescott, “Still Another Disciple of William Faulkner,” *New York Times*, 12 May 1965, M49.

9. McCarthy sent the finished draft from Ibiza to his editor in January 1967 (McCarthy to Erskine, received January 23, 1967).

10. He sent the finished draft of *The Orchard Keeper* to Random House around May 1, 1962. It underwent two substantial stages of editing and revision before its publication in 1965.

11. McCarthy and his wife sailed on the Queen Elizabeth and arrived in New York on October 17, 1967 (McCarthy, letter to Erskine, received October 11, 1967).

12. The Knoxville novel was *Suttree*, but *Child of God* reached publication first.

13. McCarthy was partway through composing his second draft of *Outer Dark* when he sailed for Europe.

14. Suzanne Baskin.

15. In Ibiza.

16. Lexington, Kentucky, is in Fayette County.

17. Since this assertion contradicts the following quotation from McCarthy and what he has said elsewhere about disliking social fiction, we have emended it to “atypical.”

18. *The Phoenix* was the literary magazine of the University of Tennessee. McCarthy published two stories there, “Wake for Susan” and “A Drowning Incident” in 1959 and 1960, both under the name C. J. McCarthy Jr.

19. Granville Hicks, “Six Firsts for Summer,” *Saturday Review*, 12 June 1965, 35–36.

20. No review by Warren has yet been found in *Harper's*.
21. Melvin Maddocks, "A Few Fine Fish That Almost Got Away." *Life Magazine*, 20 December 1968, 6.
22. Anon. "A Southern Parable." *Time*, 27 September 1968, E5.
23. Although McCarthy was then working on both *Child of God* and *Suttree*, he mentions only *Suttree* to Owen.
24. In 1969.
25. Robert Coles, "The Empty Road," *New Yorker*, 22 March 1969, 133–139.
26. The old Ashe home, which housed Catholic High School, was demolished in the year 1961. McCarthy's class of 1952 was the last to attend school there (Luce, *Reading* 195).
27. On a page of *The Orchard Keeper's* "Late Draft" that McCarthy dated June 17, 1960, he noted that it was his last quarter in school (134/230).
28. McCarthy lived in Sevier County in the fall of 1962 and throughout 1963.
29. Albert Erskine at Random House.
30. McCarthy left Tennessee for Tucson in January 1974 (De Lisle, *Conversations*).
31. Arthur Edelstein, "In the South, Two Good Stories, One Stereotype." *National Observer*, 5 July 1965, 17.
32. See note 21.
33. McCarthy's sister Barbara McCooe reveals that this punchline was often repeated in their family and that McCarthy adapted it for *Suttree's* conversation with his Aunt Martha (*Suttree* 127). Anne De Lisle adds that whenever she wore a hat, McCarthy would tell her, "You look good in a hat."
34. In Graniteville, South Carolina, in 1876.
35. For most of his childhood, high school, and university years, McCarthy's family lived in Vestal, south of Knoxville. He did not live in Louisville, Tennessee, until he bought property there in 1969.
36. Only his post-Air Force years at the university were funded by the GI Bill.
37. Agnew was Vice-President of the United States, who resigned under criminal investigation in 1973. His novel, *The Canfield Decision*, was published in 1976.
38. The son, Vardaman, is a very young child, confused but not mentally disabled.
39. The novel is set in the hill country of Mississippi.
40. *Child of God* bears the copyright date of 1973, but its official publication date was in January 1974.
41. "Film: *The Gardener's Son*," *Village Voice*, 16 January 1978, 45.
42. *Steel*, dir. Steve Carver, perf. Lee Majors and Jennifer O'Neill, Steel Company, 1979.

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