

Early Cormac McCarthy Interviews Rediscovered

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author has done vanishingly few interviews during the course of his career. In these early ones, some newly uncovered, he is less guarded.



By Elizabeth A. Harris

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Cormac McCarthy doesn't do interviews.

During his long career, McCarthy, 89, has sat for vanishingly few of them. In those conversations — including with The New York Times in 1992 and Oprah in 2007 — he often answered questions by telling stories about other people. Scholars of his work say he has long been resistant to publicly analyzing his writing process.

But in his early career, before the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, before his books were adapted into films and his name became known even by those who never read his books, he revealed something of himself and his craft.

Between 1968 and 1980, he gave at least 10 interviews to small local papers in Lexington, Kentucky, and east Tennessee, a region where he lived and had friends. He described his literary influences, his approach to writing, his reading habits and even the house he and his then-wife rebuilt by hand out of an old dairy barn.

Writing, he said, was a “compulsion” and “not a conscious process.” Asked to give practical advice to starting writers, he said, “Read.”

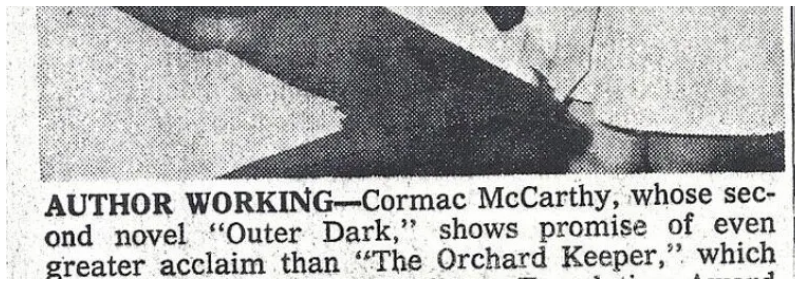
Buried in archives and largely forgotten, the interviews were uncovered by two academics, Dianne C. Luce and Zachary Turpin, and will be published on Friday by The Cormac McCarthy Journal.

Part of what sets these interviews apart from the few, later instances in which he spoke publicly, the researchers said, was that the reporters had friends in common with the author. They seem to have put McCarthy more at ease than later interviewers, Turpin said.

“He seems more relaxed and more willing to open up for a little bit,” he said. “That’s a rare find for someone like him.”

The interviews paint a portrait of a young writer, a “boyish-looking author,” who is serious about his work, but not precious about himself. They also reflect the mores of the time: One of the articles, published in the late 1960s, describes McCarthy’s then-wife, Anne De Lisle, as a “pretty English girl.”





AUTHOR WORKING—Cormac McCarthy, whose second novel “Outer Dark,” shows promise of even greater acclaim than “The Orchard Keeper,” which

McCarthy and his wife De Lisle shown at home in the Knoxville Journal, on 7 Oct. 1968.
Knoxville Journal

“McCarthy is extremely personable, almost beguiling,” wrote Mary Buckner in The Lexington Herald-Leader in 1975. “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. ‘Some days I get my books and typewriter and just stay there all day — or even a couple of days.’”

Turpin, a professor and archival researcher, ran McCarthy’s unusual name through some digital archives. (Cormac was the name of an ancient Irish king, he said.) When the search turned up some results, he reached out to Luce, a McCarthy scholar. Luce had her own small stash of articles, gathered on several visits to East Tennessee, where she dug through microfilm and paper clips. Together, they realized, they had enough to publish.

The find comes as McCarthy is preparing to publish two new intertwined novels, “The Passenger” and “Stella Maris” — his first since 2006, when he released “The Road,” a best seller that won the Pulitzer Prize.

McCarthy will give no interviews in conjunction with their release. Instead, here is a look back at a less guarded time in his life.

On Writing

McCarthy describes writing as a “compulsion.” In 1973, he told Martha Byrd of The Kingsport Times-News that he didn’t like to talk about his ideas, or even write them down, until he was sure of what he wanted to do with them.

“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.”

Once he was ready to write, he said, the words flowed.

“My hands do the thinking,” he said. “It is not a conscious process.”

Even then, there were limits to how far he would delve into his methods.

When the Kingsport Times-News reporter asked if there were ways to help an idea grow while in the “the knocking-around stage,” McCarthy had no advice.

“I can’t explain how one creates a novel,” he said. “It’s like jazz. They create as they play, and maybe only those who can do it can understand it.”

By the time he sat for these interviews, McCarthy had published novels to critical acclaim, but he hadn’t yet found commercial success — but that’s not what he was after, he told reporters.

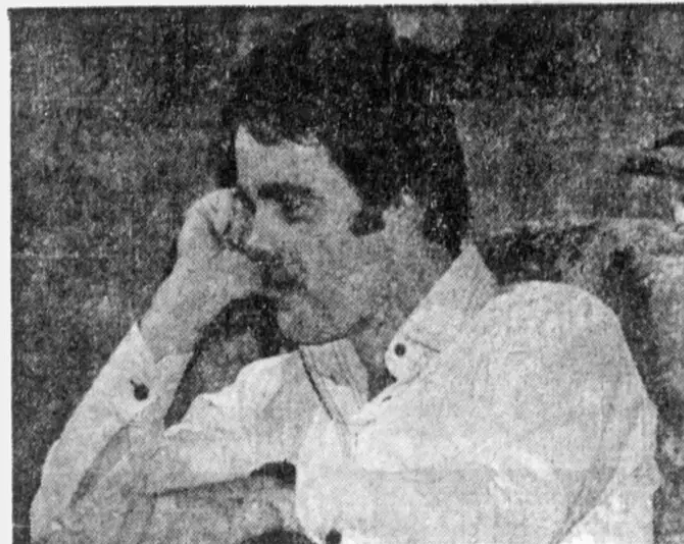
“I guess I could write a book like that (a potboiler) in about 30 days,” he told The Maryville-Alcoa Times. “In the 10 years I have been a writer that would be 120 books and surely one of them would have been a best seller.”

But, the article continued, he was “not interested in either ‘sex books’ or money”; what he wanted was happiness.

“I’ve always been horrified by the way people live their lives,” he said. “I’m basically very selfish and want to enjoy life. I always have a good time.”



'No sane person would sit down and write a novel.'



'Nothing leaves the shop unless it's the best I can do.'



'I write because I found I wasn't very good at anything else.'

Staff photos by Frank Anderson.

Speaking to The Lexington Herald-Leader, on March 2, 1975. Lexington Herald Leader

On Reading

Reading, McCarthy said, is a necessary part of writing.

"Practical advice, I believe, would be to read," he said in 1969, when asked about advice for aspiring authors. "You have to know what's been done. And you have to understand it."

Writers who influenced him, he said, included "gutsy writers," like Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, William Faulkner, James Joyce and Herman Melville. In the article from 1971, which ran under the headline "McCarthy Is One of Nation's Most Remarkable Young Authors," McCarthy said he had more than 1,500 books in his collection, which ranged from contemporary novels to the collected works of Greek playwrights.

What he was not interested in, he said, were "bad" books.

"I don't read bad books," he said in 1975. "I can't physically make my eyes move across the page."

On Privacy

"My ideal," McCarthy told The Maryville-Alcoa Times in 1971, "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."

Luce, the scholar who found his Tennessee interviews, said his desire for privacy was not based in shyness. His former wife, De Lisle, told Luce that McCarthy made friends easily and was happy to socialize with strangers when the couple traveled through Europe and Mexico. Early articles described him as amiable and charming. But he asked De Lisle not to share details of their life together, Luce said, and instructed friends not to speak to anyone about him.

Rather than a man who wants to live in solitude, the image that emerges from the interviews is of an author who wished to remain a private person even as his public reputation grew.

"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," said the 1971 article. "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."

And that was just as McCarthy wanted it.

"Fortunately no one knows I'm here," he said. "I enjoy anonymity."

Elizabeth A. Harris writes about books and publishing for The Times. @Liz_A_Harris

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