

10 Reasons Why Cormac McCarthy Is A Badass

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By [David McMillan](#) 

Cormac McCarthy is one of our greatest living American novelists. Author of *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road* (which won the Pulitzer Prize), McCarthy is a poetic storyteller whose challenging novels explore themes of violence, good and evil, and human survival. Although he's definitely not everyone's taste (several of my friends positively loathe him), I personally think the guy is a literary badass. Here are 10 reasons why.

1. McCarthy isn't afraid of delving into the dark side of America. From the violence of America's westward expansion (*Blood Meridian*), to our present-day capacity for bloodshed (*No Country*), to the possibility of a post-apocalyptic future (*The Road*), McCarthy's novels take a decidedly dark and pessimistic view of American life. There are no whitewashed mythologies of American exceptionalism and goodness in his books — only a stark look at how so much of our nation's "progress" is predicated on violence. To be sure, McCarthy's view of America may not be the whole story, but it serves as an antidote to anyone who would harbor a naïve, overly simplified notion of our national character. McCarthy knows that behind our sunlit American mythologies lies a dark side stained with blood.

2. McCarthy makes violence a thing of beauty. McCarthy's combination of rich, poetic prose and bleak, violent subject matter is one of the distinctive hallmarks of his work. And it's not uncommon to react to it with a mixture of horror (at the subject matter) and awe (at the beauty with which he describes it):

The dead lay awash in the shallows like the victims of some disaster at sea and they were strewn along the salt foreshore in a havoc of blood and entrails. Riders were towing bodies out of the bloody waters of the lake and the froth that rode lightly on the beach was a pale pink in the rising light. They moved among the dead harvesting the long black locks with their knives and leaving their victims rawskulled and strange in their bloody cauls ([Blood Meridian](#), p. 157).

3. McCarthy hates talking about his own work. You'll rarely find McCarthy on the book club circuit pontificating about his literary motivations. Despite the complexity of his novels, and the considerable craftsmanship he devotes to each one, McCarthy dislikes talking about his own work. In fact, there probably isn't a topic he finds less interesting. In his 2008 interview with Oprah Winfrey (his first on-camera interview), McCarthy acknowledges that he once turned down a paid speaking engagement to discuss one of his books — even though he and his then wife were in dire financial straits at the time. Apparently this is how he responded to the invitation: "There's nothing for me to say. Everything I have to say is there on the page."

4. McCarthy doesn't mind insulting literary giants. Here's what McCarthy had to say about Henry James and Marcel Proust: "I don't understand them... To me, that's not literature. A lot of writers who are considered good I consider strange."

5. McCarthy dislikes semi-colons and exclamation points. You don't need to read more than a page of McCarthy to realize he's not a fan of semi-colons and exclamation points. (He also thinks quotation marks are unnecessary, though some of us beg to differ.) He prefers declarative sentences and doesn't like to clutter up the page with what he considers to be useless punctuation and would rather use simple conjunctions such as and and but to connect his ideas even if it means his sentences turn into run-on sentences and sometimes require the reader to reread them once or twice in order to understand what the hell he's talking about. No doubt Faulkner and Hemingway would be proud.

6. McCarthy prefers scientists over writers. McCarthy is well known for balking the literary establishment, and would rather converse with scientists than other writers. (For over a decade, he's kept an office at the Sante Fe Institute, whose fellows are mostly theoretical scientists.) McCarthy doesn't keep up with literary trends and by his own admission hasn't read a novel in years. However, he did read and even copy-edit Lawrence Krauss's recent book on famed physicist Richard Feynman, *Quantum Man*. McCarthy enjoyed the book — though felt it suffered from too many semi-colons.

7. McCarthy is a master at creating brilliant, violent nihilists. “There is no god and we are his prophets,” says one of the characters in *The Road*. This seems to be a central idea in much of McCarthy's work, and his books are populated by characters who articulate, in one form or another, a kind of negative theology, one founded upon war, brute strength, and chance. McCarthy's major villains are not simply bad guys in the prosaic sense, but prophets of destruction, the worthy literary heirs of Shakespeare's Iago and Melville's Captain Ahab.

McCarthy's supreme achievement in this regard is Judge Holden from *Blood Meridian*, whose monologue on war might be one of the most terrifying—and terrifyingly logical—meditations about the will-to-power I've ever read:

Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard... This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god” (*Blood Meridian*, p.249).

McCarthy's villains are memorable not because they're violent — but because they're able to articulate a nihilistic code that justifies their violence. War is god, and they are his prophets.

8. McCarthy still types all of his novels on an Olivetti typewriter. In the age of the iPad, that's pretty badass.

9. Werner Herzog also thinks McCarthy's a badass. There are many trippy things out there on the Internet, but there are few things more intellectually trippy than this radio conversation between McCarthy, acclaimed filmmaker Werner Herzog, and physicist Lawrence Krauss. At one point during their free-ranging conversation, Herzog expresses his veneration for McCarthy

— comparing him to the novelist Joseph Conrad — and then proceeds to read an extended passage from *All the Pretty Horses*. Listening to Herzog (with his thick German accent) read McCarthy's prose (with its dense American language) is a surreal experience to say the least. But definitely one I recommend.

10. McCarthy is a pessimist — but a courageous one. For all the bleakness in his novels, I can't help but sense that McCarthy isn't a total nihilist. He may be pessimistic about human nature in general, but he also creates characters who defy evil, persevere against chaos, and “carry the fire” even when the road is most dark. It's as if McCarthy seems to say: the world may not be a beautiful place, but it's worth fighting for, and occasionally there are courageous people who do fight for it in spite of the odds. Granted, they may not always win the fight. But for McCarthy that isn't the point. The point is that they fought, and responded to evil not with despair — but with courage. This might not be the kind of feel-good message that many readers expect from their fiction, and admittedly one might not finish *Blood Meridian* or *The Road* feeling optimistic about the human race. Nevertheless, McCarthy's books are testaments to the importance of courage and endurance. For McCarthy, they are the two essential ingredients for human survival, and without them nothing noble or great or difficult could ever be accomplished.

Indeed, McCarthy himself wouldn't have become the badass he is without them.