# ‘If It Doesn’t Concern Life and Death, It’s Not Interesting’: Cormac McCarthy’s America

**In 2007, Rolling Stone traveled to Santa Fe to profile the most reclusive man in American letters**

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The world's most unlikely genius club meets in a sprawling adobe retreat amid the piñon scrub and juniper trees in the hills above Santa Fe. The lean physicist in baggy shorts and sandals sitting at a long table designed the first wearable computer, which he used to beat roulette in Vegas. The older scientist across from him, with curly white hair and the turquoise jeweled bolo tie, won a Nobel for discovering the quark. The attractive blond neuroscientist nibbling enchiladas nearby studies the modulation patterns of pigtailed macaques. Down the hall, a gangly Brit scrawls equations in squeaky orange magic marker on a windowpane. Even the fat tabby cat meowing for scraps has scientific cred; Dr. Zen, they call him, Director of Feline Affairs. This is the Santa Fe Institute, a sort of Justice League of renegade geeks, where teams of scientists from disparate fields study the Big Questions: Why financial markets crash. How terrorist cells form. Why viruses spread. How life ends. On any given day, you might pass Al Gore or David Foster Wallace at the éclair tray in the kitchen. After Google's honchos spent a few days wandering the Institute's sunlit halls, they were so impressed by its unique mix of brains and natural beauty that they aspired to turn their company into the "SFI of Silicon Valley."

But among this rarefied gathering of leading intellects, none is more respected than the spry old cowboy dipping his tortillas in beans at the lunch table. Dressed in a crisp blue shirt and jeans, he sits comfortably with his weathered boots crossed and listens intently as a theoretical biologist who has flown in from Berlin discusses something called evolutionary economics – the relationship between animal behavior and market-like forces. This is quintessential Santa Fe stuff, examining one phenomenon (biology) in the light and lexicon of another (economics).

The discussion soon turns to the topic of suicide. As a slide of a West African tribe flickers on the biologist's computer screen, the researchers dig into the idea that suicide attempts can be evaluated as a kind of expression of market forces – a threat to remove oneself as a source of benefits to others. The neuroscientist in the corner raises her hand and poses a question to the group: "Does anyone know another animal besides humans who commit suicide?"

Brains churn. Air conditioning whirs. For once, though, the scientists are stumped.

Then the cowboy chimes in, as he often does, with the answer.

"Dolphins," he says softly. "Dolphins do."

The only thing more unlikely than despairing dolphins is the bearer of the news: Cormac McCarthy, the most celebrated recluse in American literature since J.D. Salinger. Before he emerged to speak to Oprah earlier this year, the seventy-four-year-old author had granted only a handful of interviews in his fourdecade career. He lives so far off the beaten path, he drives a flatbed truck. His self-imposed exile goes beyond the scraps of popular legend – sleeping in cars, bathing in lakes, too poor for toothpaste. He has never voted ("poets shouldn't vote"), doesn't read fiction ("it seems like an odd thing to do"), and forsakes book signings, e-mail and cell phones. For years, little was known about him beyond the breadth and power of his work. His violent Western No Country for Old Men has been made into one of the year's most acclaimed films, and

his post-apocalyptic novel The Road won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Few living authors are as admired by their peers: When the New York Times recently asked more than 100 prominent writers, critics and editors to identify "the single best work of American fiction published in the last twentyfive years," one of the authors whose work was cited most was McCarthy.

"Cormac is viewed as a recluse because he doesn't do the literature game," says Doug Erwin, head of SFI's science steering committee. "But he's not reclusive here – he's just one of the guys." Two decades ago, McCarthy showed up at the Institute and essentially never left. "Cormac rode up on a mule one day," jokes a friend, "and the mule died." He even moved from his home in El Paso, Texas, just to be nearby. Now, after dropping off his nineyear-old son at school in the morning, McCarthy rumbles up the winding drive to SFI, where he serves as a research fellow. He checks his mail. Pours a coffee. Then he spends the rest of the day falling into long conversations with the scientists and thinkers who pass by.

For McCarthy, the scientific life of the Institute plays a fundamental role in his life as a writer, sparking his imagination with "what if" scenarios while grounding his fiction in a greater reality. "It helps you to think," he says of his interplay with SFI's intellectual "outlaws," as he affectionately calls them. "You have to go back to Elizabethan England or Periclean Athens to find this kind of extraordinary work being done." His immersion in science has left him with an admittedly pessimistic worldview; he sees human life on the planet as temporary, and he's sensitized to the degree at which we are acceleratingthis fate through violence and neglect. McCarthy likes the scientists at the Institute for a simple reason: The stuff they explore, like his writing, cuts to the bone.

"If it doesn't concern life and death," he says, "it's not interesting."

LONG BEFORE HIS MULE croaked here, McCarthy moved among thinkers. He speaks reverently of his paternal grandfather, John Francis, for whom he named his youngest son. In contemporary terms, his grandfather was a start-up entrepreneur, a handy machinist, who, like McCarthy, "was very interested in how things work." He was also an early feminist who bucked the trends by putting all his daughters – as well as his sons – through college. One of McCarthy's aunts became a biologist, another a classical-language professor. His dad, Charles, was a successful lawyer who graduated at the top of his class at Yale.

After growing up in Knoxville, McCarthy followed the family tradition and attended college, at the University of Tennessee. "I went to school because I didn't want to work," he tells me with a laugh one morning over a plate of huevos rancheros. We're at his favorite breakfast joint, a beautifully tiled restaurant in a hotel near the square in Santa Fe. This is one of his few haunts outside of the Institute, which is just a few miles up the road. "If I was in school," he says, "I could get a monthly check through the GI Bill."

But one subject immediately struck a nerve: science. "When I was a kid, I was very interested in the natural world," he says. "To this day, during casual conversations,

little-known facts about the natural world will just crop up." On a dime, McCarthy can slip into a thirtyminute treatise on some arcane biological phenomenon. "Voles leave trails where they go, like markings," he'll say out of the blue. "They're mostly composed of urine, but there are other substances as well. One absorbs ultraviolet light, which is invisible to us. But guess who can see it? The raptors flying overhead can see it. They have ultraviolet vision! That's just very interesting. You think about these birds – they're not looking for voles, they're looking for ultraviolet trails through the weeds."

In college, McCarthy studied physics and engineering – passions that remain just as strong today. "It's interesting to know how the world works," he says. "People ask me, 'Why are you interested in physics?' But why would you not be? To me, the most curious thing of all is incuriosity. I just don't get it." There was just one problem with his course of study. "I was good at it, but I wasn't that good," he says. "I didn't want to do anything unless I could be the best at it. That's my own personal extravagant ego."

But McCarthy was really good at writing. He discovered his talent after a college professor asked him to repunctuate a collection of eighteenth-century essays for inclusion in a textbook. McCarthy was hooked, and began to write and read with vigor. While he reserves high praise for a few contemporary narratives ("Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is a classic of our time"), his list of great novels stops at four: Ulysses, The Brothers Karamazov, The Sound and the Fury and his favorite, Moby-Dick- Like his own work, they explore themes of life and death with both philosophical and artful precision. McCarthy takes pains to distill a scene to its rawest and most powerful details – whether it's someone cleaning a wound or scalping a head – and chuck anything that gets in the way, including punctuation. When he talks of writers he admires, like Shakespeare, there's one quality he says they share in common: soul. "You can't write good poetry unless you have a soul to express," he says. And he holds the highest regard for those who express "the soul of the culture," as he puts it. "They know everyone thinks these things are important," he says, "and that's why they're talking about them."

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR McCarthy to find the important things he wanted to explore. The roots of his apocalyptic themes date back to his childhood in Tennessee. "You grow up in the South, you're going to see violence," he says. "And violence is pretty ugly."

McCarthy seems almost to collect the violent stories he hears, like the tale of a friend who sold tie-downs used to secure mobile homes in the face of tornadoes. One day, a colleague of the salesman urged him to call on an attractive customer. "So he knocked on the mobile-home door," McCarthy says, "and this pretty good-looking woman came to the door and said, 'Just come in.' No questions at all, just openly flirtatious. But it was such a strong come-on and she was so weird, he said, 'No, there's something wrong here, I'm going to take a pass on this.' "

Three months later, the guy picked up the newspaper and saw the woman's picture on the front page. "This woman and her boyfriend had been arrested," McCarthy says. "They had killed her husband with an ax."

After dropping out of college to work at an auto shop and write, McCarthy gained attention for the dark Appalachian soul he so deftly expressed. A necrophiliac collects corpses in caves in Child of God. A brother impregnates his sister in Outer Dar\, only to leave the baby for dead in the woods. It was McCarthy's ability to depict horrific realities with heart and exactitude that both attracted and repelled.

Not surprisingly, given their subject matter, his early novels didn't sell. Over the years, McCarthy married, had his first son, divorced, traveled, lived in Ibiza, married again. Through it all, he felt life provided for him when he most needed it. In college, an arts foundation rewarded his first works with a grant. A promotional packet of toothpaste arrived in the mail the morning he had run out. One time, he had just eaten the last scraps of food in his freezer when the doorbell rang. It was a courier. "I thought he was there to arrest me," McCarthy jokes. Instead, the guy handed him an envelope with a check for $20,000 – a gift from a private patron of the arts.

After writing what he considers his most autobiographical novel, Suttree – a darkly comic story that follows a downand-out guy on a houseboat in Tennes see who drifts, drinks and deals with picaresque scoundrels, like a kid who gets arrested for fucking a watermelon in a farmer's patch – McCarthy left Appalachia behind and turned to what he considers the great subject of our time: the American West. "It's a story that everyone in the world knows," he says. "You can go to Mongolia and they know about cowboys and Indians – but no one had taken it seriously and as a subject for literary effort." So he packed his bags for Texas and hit the road.

For four years, McCarthy explored the Southwest and Mexico, studying the culture and history of the region. The period between the Mexican War and the great westward migration of the mid-nineteenth century was, he says, "a turning point of American history." He transformed his research into Blood Meridian, his apocalyptic Western of Indian scalpers. Harold Bloom, the literary critic, hailed the novel as one of the greatest of the twentieth century.

But in writing this brutal epic of the past, McCarthy kept one foot firmly planted in a doomsday future: ours. "If I wrote about violence in an exaggerated way, it was looking at a future that I imagined would be a lot more violent," he says. "And it is. Can you remember twenty years ago having beheadings on TV? I can't."

IT'S THE SIXTH ANNIVERSARY or September 11$^{th}$, and scientists from the Santa Fe Institute are contemplating the end of the world. The occasion is a three-day conference on climate change. This evening, no one in the standing-room crowd of locals crammed into the auditorium recognizes McCarthy as he hunkers into his seat down front. When I remark on how many people are interested in tonight's topic, McCarthy replies, "Of course it's relevant – we're all going to die."

Indeed, the findings are grim. For ninety minutes, Harvard geochemist Daniel Schräg stands at the podium and paints a Bruckheimer-esque picture of planetary destruc-

tion. Nuclear winters. Mass extinction. Volcanic hell. “Imagine if a third of the Earth erupted,” Schräg says, as a fiery orange swirl envelops a globe on the screen behind him.

It was a gathering like this that first drew McCarthy to the Institute. It began in 1981, when he was among the first in the arts and sciences to receive a so-called genius grant from the MacArthur Foundation. Flown to Chicago for a dinner with the other recipients, McCarthy found himself avoiding his fellow writers. “The artsy crowd was all dressed and drugged and ready to party,” he recalls. “I just started hanging out with scientists because they were more interesting.”

Chief among them: Murray GellMann, winner of the Nobel Prize for his work in particle physics and thendirector of the MacArthur Foundation. The unlikely duo became fast friends, and their meeting would radically alter the course of McCarthy’s life. “I was interested in ecology, psychology, archaeology, linguistics,” Gell-Mann recalls. A group of scientists he knew at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, home of the Manhattan Project after World War II, were also eager for a more interdisciplinary approach. Led by George Cowan, head of research at Los Alamos, they created the Santa Fe Institute in 1984.

With Cowan as president and GellMann as chair of the board, SFI took over an old convent in the heart of Santa Fe, filled it with renaissance thinkers and began forging an emerging science called complexity. It’s the study of the complex systems behind our lives – from climate patterns to human societies – and how they evolve and adapt. By uncovering these systems and the agents that propel them, Gell-Mann and his colleagues reasoned, we can better understand the dynamics of life itself.

SFI became a mecca for wayward scientists. They simulated stock markets and bird flocks on computers by day, and discussed the connections over blue-corn enchiladas late into the night. The Institute’s researchers were pursuing artificial life and computer auctions a decade before the mainstream world ventured online. Not everyone was a fan. “People would say, ‘I don’t know about this big mush that you’re trying to create,’ ” Gell-Mann recalls.

While he was writing his first best seller, All the Pretty Horses, McCarthy made regular trips from El Paso to the Institute. Part of the appeal, beyond the excitement of the science, is the anonymity. Since he does most of his writing at home and doesn’t always keep a formal office at the Institute, he can easily go unnoticed. “A lot of people here have no idea who I am,” McCarthy says. Those who do aren’t sure what to make of the sight. “People who know my work walk in and they’re kind of confused as to why I’m there,” he says, “but that’s OK. They soon get over that.”

Years after McCarthy first arrived at the Institute, his meals at SFI remain a highlight of his day. “You sit down to lunch and you just don’t know who’s going to be there,” he says. “People drift in from all over the world- Nobel-winning chemists and biologists – and they’re sitting next to you at lunch. They’re just very generous. You ask them something and they’ll just stop what they’re doing and sit down and tell you all about it. And that’s rather remarkable.”

McCarthy frequently proofreads scientific papers and books by SFI's extended family. Harvard physicist Lisa Randall was surprised when she heard through a friend at the Institute that McCarthy was interested in reading a draft of her book Warped Passages, a heady treatise that explores the hidden dimensions of the universe. "I got the manuscript back in the mail, and it was marked up on every page," Randall says. "He read everything. He essentially copy-edited it, getting rid of some of my semicolons, which he really didn't like."

For McCarthy, the scientific interplay has forced him to improve his own work. "Science is very rigorous," he says. "When you hang out with scientists and see how they think, you can't do so without developing a respect for it. And part of what you respect is their rigor. When you say something, it needs to be right. You can't just speculate idly about things."

That sense of rigor is apparent in the increasingly taut work McCarthy has produced since moving to Santa Fe, from No Country for Old Men through his recent play, The Sunset Limited. "Writing is rewriting," he says. "Someone said easy writing makes for hard reading." But he's still not one to map out a novel before he begins. "I just sit down and write whatever is interesting. If you're writing mystery stories or something, you might want to have an outline, because it all has to have a logic and fall into place and have a beginning, a middle and an end. But if you're writing a novel, the best things just sort of come out of the blue. It's a subconscious process. You don't really know what you're doing most of the time."

So you start with a character or a scene?

"You start with anything," he says. "Faulkner used to say the way he started The Sound and the Fury was with this single image of a girl in a tree looking through a single window at her grandmother's funeral, and the other girl looking at her muddy drawers from where they'd been playing. It was just that image, which was probably just some image from his childhood. You think about that image," he laughs. "Does The Sound and the Fury inevitably spring from that image? Well I don't think so."

ONE DAY A FEW YEARS AGO, after checking his mail and pouring his coffee, McCarthy gingerly made his way down the hall at the Institute. He passed the equation-scrawled windowpane, down the steps where Dr. Zen was curled in the corner, past the long, red sofa where a grad student lay sprawled, and into the corner office of his friend Doug Erwin. Then he started asking about the apocalypse. In particular, he wanted to know about extinction-the Cretaceous-Tertiary meteorite that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.

Erwin is the guy to ask. A Smithsonian paleobiologist with a boyish fop of brown hair, Erwin is an expert on the subject: He wrote a book titled Extinction. He and McCarthy share a wry and fatalistic view of our time here on Earth. "The planet is going to do just fine without us," Erwin says. "We're an encephalized ape that won't last long."

Erwin told McCarthy about the likely aftermath of the deadly meteorite: the magnitude of the desolation, the collapse of ecosystems, the fallout of debris and gases.

Then, one day last year, Erwin sat down to read a galley of The Road, which depicts the harrowing, post-apocalyptic journey of a father and son. Erwin smiled – so this is what McCarthy was up to, he figured.

He let his friend off the hook for the novel's intentional inaccuracies. "Instead of having gray skies that look like Beijing, it would actually be blue skies, like this," Erwin tells me one afternoon, as he motions outside his window to the hills rolling down toward Santa Fe. "There would also be a lot more ferns. But because of what he was trying to achieve, he had to take some artistic license. That book was about his son."

Nine years ago, after marrying for the third time, McCarthy became a father again. Soon after, in 2001, he was visiting Tennessee when the attacks of 9/11 unfolded. Being a septuagenarian dad in the modern age is sobering. "When you're young and single, you hang out in bars and don't think about what's going to happen," McCarthy says. "But in the next fifty years when you have kids, you start thinking of their life and the world they have to live in. And that's a sobering thought these days. I'm not one of those conspiracy guys, but the world is in a very unstable situation. If you were to take thoughtful people on, say, January ist, 1900, and tell them what the twentieth century was going to look like, they'd say, Are you shitting me?' "

McCarthy began to wonder about the future facing his boy. "I think about John all the time and what the world's going to be like," he says. "It's going to be a very troubled place." One night, during a trip to Texas with John, McCarthy imagined such a place. While his son slept, McCarthy gazed out the window of his room and pictured flames on the hill. He later decided to write a novel about it; The Road is dedicated to his son. While McCarthy suggests that the ashcovered world in the novel is the result of a meteor hit, his money is on humans destroying each other before an environmental catastrophe sets in. "We're going to do ourselves in first," he says.

In part, he blames an increasingly violent society. "If kids are unstable, they may very well be cranked up by the violence they see, and might do things that they wouldn't have done or would have taken them longer to get around to," McCarthy says. "But the real culprit is violence against children. A lot of children don't grow up well. They're being starved and sexually molested. We know how to make serial killers. You just take a Type A kid who's fairly bright and just beat the crap out of him day after day. That's how it's done."

While The Road paints a picture of life after the end, his previous novel, No Country for Old Men, suggests how the final days begin. In a particularly memorable scene, a graying sheriff in the book declares, "It starts when you begin to overlook bad manners. Any time you quit hearin Sir and Mam the end is pretty much in sight." Like the characters in his novels, whether it's the young cowboys of the Border Trilogy or the charming rogues of Suttree, McCarthy tries to live by a code of civility. He shows up when he says he'll show up. He inquires about sick parents. After a meal at SFI, he's the first to clear a visitor's plate. When a friend refused to see a doctor, McCarthy

swore to call every day and bug him until he got the care he needed. After ten days of calls, the friend gave in.

At the same time, however, McCarthy seems resigned to the fact that bad manners and violence are here to stay. "There are a lot of people out there – a lot who grew up in the Sixties and are still flower children – who imagine you can just get people to stop being violent," he says. "They pretend that the world they live in is that world, but it's not. The world's not like the world they want to live in, and probably never will be."

It's SEPTEMBER 13TH, THE LAST day of the Santa Fe Institute's climate-change conference, and McCarthy takes a seat near the front. It has been a dark week: 9/11 memorials. Deadly earthquakes in Indonesia. A gang of West Virginians caught after raping and beating a young black woman all -week in a trailer. President Bush on TV, talking about an extended stay in Iraq. It's times like these when McCarthy imagines packing up and hitting the road for good. "If the family situation was different, I could see taking John and going to New Zealand," he says. "It's a civilized place and far from the evil shit going down."

Taking the stage, SFI president Geoffrey West suggests that there are two roads of thought we can choose to follow. The first is that we can believe in our power to heal the Earth before it's too late. He tells the audience that America needs to create a sort of reverse Manhattan Project – call it the Santa Fe Project – that would bring together a consortium of top minds to engineer solutions to the escalating crises of sustainability and survival.

Then again, he adds, there is another path. We can choose to believe that "we're a blip on the landscape, and that the vision of another SFI fellow, Cormac McCarthy, is where we're headed."

At the mention of McCarthy's name, there's a rumbling in the crowd as retirees crane over to find Oprah's bookclub man. Making his way back to his seat, West whispers sheepishly to McCarthy, "You're never going to forgive me, are you?" McCarthy good-naturedly pats West on the shoulder and assures him that it's all right.

In fact, as McCarthy told me earlier in the day, he has been thinking about his own finale, too. "Eventually you start to realize that you aren't going to be around for very long," he says. For the past few years, his sense of mortality has inspired him to work on as many as five novels at a time. No Country for Old Men just happened to be the one he finished first. Switching back and forth between narratives, he says, isn't a problem. All he has to do is work a bit on one book, take a walk, and then switch gears into something else. He's also entertaining what he may do should he run out of steam.

"If I get too old to write novels, I may just keep a journal for a year or two and just sort of make notes on books that I read and stuff like that," he says. But all this talk about the end of the world has made him appreciate more than ever what he has. "There is for a man two things in life that are very important, head and shoulders

above everything else," he says. "Find work you like, and find someone to live with you like. Very few people get both."

On this evening, as the Institute's lecture ends and the lights come up on the crowd, McCarthy says goodbye to his friends and heads out into the darkness. It's getting late. Tomorrow's a weekday. He wants to wake up early and drive his boy to school.

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