# Meeting McCarthy

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In March of 1989, while traveling to El Paso with Betty Carey, I was afforded the opportunity of meeting Cormac McCarthy. Betty Carey, of Las Vegas World Series of Poker fame, was writing a book about her adventures as a professional gambler. She had arranged to meet with McCarthy to discuss her current writing, as well as to rendezvous with their common friend, Frank Morton, another gambler. What follows is my best recollection of the several conversations that took place over three days of our visit. I made no tape recording or notes during these informal, quite friendly talks, but wrote what I remembered in a journal after returning from El Paso. This account is recreated from chapters in my unpublished novel based on my year-long writing partnership with Betty Carey, and is as accurate as memory allows. Where I felt reasonable confident about actual words, I have used direct quotations. Elsewhere, I have paraphrased.

On a bright spring Sunday morning, Betty and I awaited McCarthy in a quaint family restaurant on Mesa Avenue in El Paso, where Cormac suggested we meet to have brunch. Betty clutched a handkerchief to absorb the perspiration from her hands. She was nervous, as was I. Each time the entrance door opened, we glanced in anticipation. Finally a man, nondescript—medium build, short hair, a dull plaid shirt—walked down the short flight of stairs, his eyes searching the lower tier where we seated. It was Cormac McCarthy.

Betty smiled and we got up to greet her friend. McCarthy asked about Betty's book. He had been privy to her very first draft, written three years before. Her stories were about life as a gambler. For thirteen years she had won and lost fortunes, sitting at poker tables across the country with men like Jack Strauss and Amarillo Slim, risking life to hijackers, still able to spirit away tidy sums unknown to anyone but herself. Betty told McCarthy that so much had happened since that first draft that she was in the process of rewriting the whole story. Betty had allegedly been cheated in a Las Vegas casino scam. There were allegations of Gaming Commission and FBI coverups. Her case was then on appeal before the Nevada Supreme Court, ultimately to be thrown out because of the statute of limitations.

She asked McCarthy if it was common for writers to do so much rewriting. He said he knew a few writers who would compose a hundred pages of a novel and then have to start over, but that he usually knew where his own novels were going from the start.

Betty told McCarthy that she and I had written the screenplay of her story, and that ICM of Los Angeles had said it possessed some of the same appeal as Silkwood. She failed to mention that the agent had turned it down for being "awkwardly written," because we'd portrayed Betty as an "arrogant and unsympathetic character," and because "the authors seem inexperienced in mapping out dramatic framework." She said, "I'm writing my book in a suspense format. I want it to be a best seller."

“I don’t read best sellers,” McCarthy said. Feeling responsible for the latest direction the book had taken, I explained, “What she means by ‘best seller’ is that she wants the facts of the casino scam to reach as many people as possible.” With a curt nod McCarthy indicated that he had understood that to be Betty’s meaning. He acted friendly yet cool toward me, a stranger.

McCarthy asked if there was a particular author that Betty was patterning her novel after. I mentioned Ken Follett. McCarthy nodded and said that Follet (sic) was good. He mentioned also that Stephen King was a good writer. From his earlier comment on best sellers, I wasn’t sure if McCarthy had read these authors or if he was speaking from hearsay.

“What do you read?” I asked. McCarthy said he read mostly nonfiction, although he did enjoy Hemingway. Betty and I had a conversation the day before with Irving Brown and his wife, proprietors of a used and rare book store on Mesa Avenue. An acquaintance of McCarthy as well as a professor of philosophy at the University of Texas, El Paso, Brown told us that McCarthy—an unpretentious man who often did his laundry right next door—considered Melville the greatest author, and that he read books about astronomy and physics. Brown especially liked the part in Suttree where Cornelius sees his reflection in the glass door and thinks, “Suttree and anti-Suttree.” Brown said that in his opinion McCarthy had over-read Plato.

Betty mentioned how hard it was to find the time to write. When I said, “You have to be selfish,” McCarthy agreed, but substituted the word “ruthless.” Betty listed a few of the interruptions she had to put up with, eliciting McCarthy’s remark that he could write in a train station if he had to, but not if somebody kept asking for directions. McCarthy said that he wrote in the morning, every morning. “Why not write every day?” he asked rhetorically. “In the afternoon I visit friends. You can’t write all day long.”

When Betty said she wished she could just run away from her obligations and be free to write, McCarthy recalled that once he had spent an entire year doing little more than playing pool with his friends.

Betty and McCarthy talked about their lives, the consequences of their successes. Betty said that no more would she consent to interviews because so often they changed the story, often sensationalizing her life beyond reality. McCarthy agreed, saying that he would not do interviews.1 He told Betty that J. D. Salinger had given only one interview throughout his career as a novelist, to elementary children.

“Do you teach?” I asked.

Looking at me sternly, McCarthy said that he did not, and he seemed not to want to discuss it further. He mentioned an author, Robert Fulghum, who had published a somewhat humorous book about learning all you need to know by the time you graduate from kindergarten. McCarthy gave a few examples: “To tell the truth. Not to hit each other. To be fair.”

Betty laughed. “I like that,” she said. From the things McCarthy said about academia, I understood him to believe that many of human beings’ problems arose from pursuits in

education. In a later conversation about spiritual experiences, McCarthy said that education often got in the way of understanding. He added that in certain Eskimo cultures, art, of both high and low quality, was seen as good. Art was a personal expression. Nobody went around telling children how to do theirs differently.

Betty said she felt different from most people in our society, that she was very much a loner and that her friends would not be considered mainstream. McCarthy referred to himself and Betty as "outlaws." He gazed at her and said, "Look who we are. We're desperate people." They had both lived such uncommon lives that their spirits were easily kindred. I felt that my own life had been too sheltered.

Again I asked McCarthy if he could recommend any good books or authors that a beginning writer should read. He said, "All great writers read all other great writers." Upon further prodding, he mentioned several of John McFee's books and The Song Lines by Bruce Chatwin. McCarthy said that he knew Larry McMurtry; because McCarthy loved the television movie "Lonesome Dove" so much, he said that he would never read the book.

Betty mentioned her love of traveling and said that some people had suggested she write a book about her travels, or a how-to-on poker, and forget the nonsense about exposing the alleged casino scam that had cheated her out of many thousands of dollars. Betty asked about what she could and could not write about other people. McCarthy said that writers had great latitude in their writing and, on a question about other people's ideas, said, "If you like it, use it." I believe this came under the axiom that everything had already been written and that most ideas were neither unique in themselves nor original.

Brunch ended and the coffee pot went dry. I picked up the bill. Betty and I drove the camper back to the motel with McCarthy following in his old beater. The exterior of his car had been sandblasted to the metal and touched up with primer paint. It looked prepped for the body shop. Even with my untrained ear, I could tell the engine ran well.

At the motel Betty dug into her briefcase for her most recently drafted chapter, which she handed to McCarthy, apologizing for its not being typed. McCarthy said, "That's all right. We're friends. We do things like this for each other."

The next day, Betty and I met McCarthy at an out-of-the-way health food store that served frozen yogurt and sandwiches. We ordered at the counter and took seats at a small table next to the front window. After we were served, the conversation turned to writing. Betty asked which person it would be best to write her story in, and McCarthy said that was always a hard question to answer. He asked which person she felt most comfortable writing in, and Betty said that both the first and third had their benefits, but that she just couldn't decide. She wanted McCarthy to tell her which to use, and he could not do that. He offered suggestions quite sparingly. To a question about how descriptive to make Betty's book, McCarthy said that the point of most novels could be told in a paragraph. The reason they're longer is so the author can tell a story. And he said, "Don't ever treat your audience as if they're stupid. Your reader is smart."

"Have you read Faulkner's As I Lay Dying?" McCarthy asked. She had not. He explained that each chapter of the novel had been written in the first person from the perspective of each of the different characters. When he suggested that Betty might try something like

that, I could see hopelessness on Betty's face. She had been working on her book for over three years.

McCarthy mentioned that Faulkner had written the novel during his spare moments while working on a manual labor job at night. He said that Faulkner had even used a wheelbarrow on which to compose the story. McCarthy said that Faulkner never expected the novel to become great, and that the novel had a certain amateurish quality that gave the book its great appeal. He said that Betty should not be overly concerned if her writing was not professional, and that she should try to retain the natural quality that her writing had, as that was often the mark of literature. Because Betty was having trouble getting the most recent draft of the novel started, McCarthy suggested that she could try writing the ending of her story first, then the beginning. He told her to get a tape recorder and tell her stories into a microphone and then play them back.

Betty talked about the most recent developments of her story, but even with McCarthy she was hesitant to reveal many of the specifics. McCarthy became curious when Betty described the four levels by which she categorized poker players. She explained that the top two levels involved the reading of "tells" (short for "telegraphing"), and the ability to send out misleading "false tells." She mentioned how she tested people by asking "set up" questions and viewing their responses. She would often ask questions to which she was sure a person would lie, and then remember what behaviors accompanied those responses.

"Fascinating," McCarthy said. "Do I have any tells?"

Betty laughed and studied him more closely. "I haven't noticed any yet."

That night, in a freak blizzard, Betty and I drove to a motel across town where Frank Morton was spending the night on his way home from Los Angeles. Frank was the classic itinerant gambler, as well as a somewhat unorthodox evangelist. He was the liaison who had initially brought McCarthy and Betty together.

A tall man with graying hair, Frank spoke with a voice that was garbled with years of cigarette smoking, and his breathing was labored. I found him friendly and rather opinionated, but he would listen to your ideas if you could break into the stream of his talk.

After McCarthy arrived, we all climbed into Frank's car. The snow and sleet moved on, leaving a violent sand storm in its wake. Frank followed McCarthy's directions to a Mexican restaurant, and by the time we got there, the wind had died. Frank talked on about the hate among the races in L.A., about people's lack of trust and the general downfall of the human condition. Each of us added opinions now and then, but it was Frank who monopolized the conversation and filled the air with smoke. We were his congregation. McCarthy sat and listened, offering few observations of his own.

Back at his motel room, Frank related a number of personal religious experiences that he had had over the years, pointing out the flaws in other people's lack of faith. I challenged him, saying that one day science would understand these unexplained phenomena for what they really were.

McCarthy commented that some cultures used drugs to enhance the spiritual experience, and that he had tried LSD before the drug was made illegal. He said that it had helped to open his eyes to these kinds of experiences. Betty recounted having seen the image of Christ on a bus while in Costa Rica. This had been at a time following the casino scam when Betty had been on the run. She said that her experience was as real as our sitting together in the motel room. It had not been a dream or hallucination.

Always the skeptic, I said, "But how does that prove Christianity? Why not Buddha or Allah? You saw Jesus because you were raised in Jesus-land." I looked to Frank and McCarthy. Their expressions were sympathetic.

McCarthy was slumped into one of the chairs with his left leg slung over the arm rest. He appeared a very patient listener. He said that he felt sorry for me because I was unable to grasp this concept of spiritual experience. He said that people all over the world, in every religion, were familiar with this experience. He asked if I'd ever read William James's The Varieties of Religious Experience. I had not. His attitude seemed to indicate that in this book were the answers to many of the questions posed during our evening discussion. I was nonplussed. "Truth," McCarthy said about what writers must accomplish in their writing.

"But what exactly is truth?" I asked.

"Truth," he repeated, his implications tacit.

The next morning, Betty and I were at the motel when McCarthy arrived to go over his response to Betty's chapter. He had written his critique on separate, smaller pieces of paper. Point by point, he went over his comments, offering occasional praise while not sparing the rod. Afterwards, I listed the three qualities I believed necessary for a person to become a successful writher: "To read a lot. To write a lot. To experience a lot." McCarthy said that we all had experience enough from which to write.

Months after our visit, I wrote McCarthy, completing a few thoughts I'd been unable to that night we discussed spiritual experiences. Some time later, I received his reply.

He said that the religious experience is always described through the symbols of a particular culture and thus is somewhat misrepresented by them. He indicated that even the religious person is often uncomfortable with such experiences and accounts of them, and that those who have not had a religious experience cannot comprehend it through second-hand accounts, even good ones like James's Varieties of Religious Experience. He went on to say that he thinks the mystical experience is a direct apprehension of reality, unmediated by symbol, and he ended with the thought that our inability to see spiritual truth is the greater mystery.

NOTES

1 He has recently made an exception to this rule, granting an interview to the Richard B. Woodward of the New York Times Magazine on the occasion of the publication of All the Pretty Horses. My account of our visit with McCarthy, neither intended nor conducted as an interview, is published here with his knowledge.