Why am I here?
(The gospel according to Cormac McCarthy) (1)

Keynote Speaker Dr. Jay Ellis (Colorado)

(Photo by Clay Owen, Knoxville News Sentinel)

"The Road Home (Reconsidering the relationship of the McCarthy canon to the contemporary Southern and American literary tradition)" was the subject of a conference held in the Conference Center of the University of Tennessee from April 26-28, 2007.

Conferees from Colorado, Tennessee, Vermont, Great Britain, Utah, Alabama, Florida, Texas, South and North Carolina and several other states agreed that McCarthy's recent book, The Road (September 26, 2006), will expand the author's canon. (2)

As a tribute to McCarthy's influence and his contribution to current literature, the widely-advertised conference attracted an even mix of "town" and "gown." In the author's humble opinion, this mix accrued dividends for the group and both "gown" and "town" benefited.

Fred Brown, writing in the Knoxville News Sentinel (April 27, 2007), quotes the Keynote Speaker, Dr. Jay Ellis of the University of Colorado, author of the recent book, No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy (2006), who says, "... The Road, which was awarded the 2007 Pulitzer Prize this month, possesses most of the themes for which the author has become famous. / There is a battle of good and evil, the forces of darkness (which seem to be winning), survival, lawlessness and wanton destruction. There is the symbolism of father-and-son struggles, and of home and hearth in which mothers give birth but are also capable of rejecting the..."
child. The stories also imply larger theological themes.

*The Road* is #1 on Amazon.com's "Literature and Fiction List," although it was released seven months ago (September 26, 2006) and #2 on the New York Time Book Review. It has had 425 reviews on Amazon.com while earning a 4 1/2 star rating. Lastly, the book has been chosen as the Oprah Book Club selection and, for the first time in recent memory, the author has agreed to be interviewed on Oprah's program. (3)

There are plans for the University of Tennessee Library's "Newfound Press" to publish the proceedings of the conference. Other sophisticated learning aids, possibly including a CD of the presentations, are also possible. Obviously, preparation of that material will take time.

This report merely represents the observations of one attendee and has no official connection with the conference. Its major purpose is to pay a tribute to the organizer of the event, Dr. Chris Walsh, and his teammates, Nicola Evely, Rich Wallach and Dr. Wesley G. Morgan Jr., and to the conferees for an excellent learning experience.

The University of Tennessee Conference Center represents the "state of the art" in meeting facilities--control of light, temperature and sound, comfortable seating, appropriate refreshment and rest breaks, etc. The environment was conducive both to learning and to retention of the content. (4)

In a world of competing ideas, conferences such as this must be encouraged. People everywhere must be thinking about how she/he can make a difference in their own community and beyond. Would that we all could earn this epitaph, "She/he lived a happy life and made a positive difference in the life of her/his fellow woman/man."

But what else can be said about the book?

USA Today says, "His most compelling, moving and accessible novel since *All the Pretty Horses*... McCarthy brilliantly captures the knife edge that fugitives in a hostile world stand on... Amid this Godot-like bleakness, McCarthy shares something vital and enduring about the boy's spirit, his father's love and the nature of bravery itself."

The San Francisco Chronicle says, "His tale of survival and the miracle of goodness only adds to McCarthy's stature as a living master. It's gripping, frightening and, ultimately, beautiful. It might very well be the best book of the year, period."

The New York Times Book Review says, "Vivid, eloquent... The Road is the most readable of [McCarthy's] works, and consistently brilliant in its imagining of the posthumous condition of nature and civilization."

Several speakers transposed this author back to 1946 and a University of Michigan class in Philosophy, when he was 20 years old and an NROTC cadet in the Navy V-5 program. No one should be surprised that he needed a refresher course. The speakers' review of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), German philosopher, and Don Juan Cardoza (1889-1980), Spanish philosopher, bridged one intellectually into McCarthy and into his prose that often conveys very deep philosophical concepts.

The experience made this attendee yearn for the transcript and the bibliography that the transcript will, no doubt, contain. Most attendees felt that McCarthy has studied those philosophers and many others in developing his canon. His Southwest Trilogy contains lengthy passages in eloquent classic Spanish and supports that theory abundantly. The door is open for us to explore with him.

The apocalyptic nature of *The Road* could/should lead mankind to seek more appropriate answers to...
the questions of our time and to the conflict of ideas extended from the past and into our current world scene. *The Road* describes in graphic detail the depravities to which man can descend. In his other works, if not in this one, McCarthy cites the benefits to mankind of *agape* (5)—love for one's sisters and brothers and the application of the supreme commandment, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Would that McCarthy's precepts and his examples of kindness and tolerance permeate international affairs.

We no longer have William S. Buckley Jr., Alistair Cooke, David Susskind and Brian Lamb doing in-depth interviews and exploring with him/her an author's concepts. We have only Oprah (and maybe Charlie Rose on occasion). Oprah bears a heavy burden, but she wears her mantle well. The exposure provided by her website and her Book Club and her influence on society bode well for wide exposure to the McCarthy Canon.

Is there hope for our civilization? That was a recurring question throughout the conference. Even, considering McCarthy's theme and his closing symbolism with only the boy and some seeds surviving, the consensus was "Yes!"

But the only hope is in us and in what we do to preserve civilization.

D-McCarthyCormac (4/30/07)

Endnotes:

(1) The word "gospel" (note no capitals) is used as defined in the *Random House Collegiate Dictionary* (1968): 7. *Something regarded as true and implicitly believed.*

(2) As a practicing Christian, the author is using the terms "gospel" and "canon" with some reluctance. *Canon* is used as defined thus: 3. *A body of rules, principles or standards accepted as axiomatic and universally binding, as in a field of study or art.*

(3) Although not confirmed, some indications are that the interview has already been taped in the author's Santa Fe, NM home, is being edited and will air the last of May.

(4) The author is a past-president of the oldest American comprehensive continuing education program for members of an American profession, the Optometric Extension Program Foundation (founded in 1928). He subscribes to the guidelines developed by Dr. Amiel Francke, prominent Washington, D.C. optometrist, recognizing the value of an appropriate visual and auditory environment and other ideal conditions for learning. The room environment was in keeping with the oft-neglected principles enunciated by the late Dr. Darrell Boyd Harmon of the University of Texas. Dr. Joseph Johnston, former University of Tennessee president is to be complimented for his foresight in acquiring the site and providing such an environment for such meetings as this.

(5) *Agape* is, for this purpose, defined as: *Unselfish platonic love of one person for another, unselfish love.*

Addendum:

On the closing day of the McCarthy Conference; Jack Neely, prominent local historian and author, conducted "The Suttree Stagger" which is a seven-hour walking trip through downtown Knoxville and the nearby suburbs of Mechanicsville and Happy Hollow. There were stops at various locations described in McCarthy's early book, *Suttree* [Random House, 1979], which is set in Knoxville. Three home grown actors "The White Mule Players" played the roles of characters in the book. It appeared a good time was had by all. Jack Neely "wrote the book" on Knoxville history. In fact he wrote four of them: *Secret History* (1995), *Secret History II* (1998), *Marble City* (1999) and *From the Shadow Side* (2003).
His most recent book has an epigraph from *Suttree* on the chapter entitled The Bottom of the River: "He could hear the river talking softly beneath him.... Beneath the sliding water cannons and carriages, trunnions seized and rusting in the mud, keelboats rotted to the consistency of mucilage....a thick muck shot with broken glass, with bones and rusted tins and bits of crockery reticulate with mudblack crazings."

THE SUTTREE STAGGER

(April 28, 2007)

1. Conference Coordinator Dr. Chris Walsh (Tennessee), Euan Gallivan (Nottingham, England)
   and Conference Resource Person Nicola Evely

   (My apologies for the sunspot to the right.)
2. Dr. Walsh, Stagger Conductor Col. Jack Neely (Knoxville Author and Historian), Charles "J-Bone" Thomas and Euan Gallivan

3. Col. Jack Neely describing events that occurred on Market Square
4. Scott "Goatman" McNutt and Charles "Police" Thomas read events that occurred at the Post Office and Federal Courthouse

5. Decisions, Decisions, Decisions: Shall I have scrambled eggs, grits and gravy or a bagel and cream cheese?
6. Dr. Phillip Snyder (Utah), Rick Wallach (Florida)

and Dr. Edwin T. Arnold (North Carolina)

7. Michael Fonash (Delaware), Dr. Jay Ellis (Colorado), Andrew Husband (Texas) and Dr. Wesley G. Morgan Jr. (Tennessee)
8. J-Bone and Euan discussing Knoxville history and other heavy subjects

8B. Dr. James Vanden Bosch (Michigan), Robert Hodge (Tennessee)

and Dr. Tim Edwards (Alabama)
9. Dr. Walsh and Nikki Evely view the River and the site of Sut's houseboat

(My apologies for the lack of focus)
10. Local Author Kitty Van Duser and Dr. Dianne Luce (South Carolina)
11. Michael Hayes reads of life under the bridge with Harrogate's "home" in the background

A quote from the MetroPulse* "Ear to the Ground" column on May 3, 2007:

Staggering Home

The Cormac McCarthy Conference dubbed “The Road Home” drew about two dozen scholars of the freshly minted Pulitzer honoree from as far away as Utah and Nottingham. Most stayed in town for an irregular local tradition, the Suttree Stagger, a pub crawl based on the 1979 picaresque novel that is the author's most vividly Knoxville-based work and organized by a shadowy organization known as the White Mule Preservation Society. About 40-50 pilgrims set out that morning in a misty rain on Market Square at 10:30, re-enacted the famous goat man scene at the post office, read on the site of Suttree's houseboat home on Volunteer Landing, visited Gene Harrogate's legendary sub-viaduct lair, brunched on catfish as they witnessed more dramatic readings at the Bistro, competed with TV-watching sports fans and a vegetarian festival at the Preservation Pub, and joined the library's backyard poetry festival, to catch the likes of gonzo poet Jack Rentfro and bandleader Phil Pollard, both of whom have Suttree-influenced work in their regular repertoires. About half the pilgrims were still afoot when they reached the Corner Lounge on North Central, one of the few existing businesses cited in the book, at about 6 p.m., for a few PBRs and some mets and beans.

*MetroPulse is the paper for which Jack Neely is the columnist responsible for Knoxville history.

The End, see you next year.