

Wallach, Rick, ed. Myth, legend, dust: Critical responses to Cormac McCarthy. New York: Manchester U P, 2000. Pp. xvi, 399. Paper: \$27.95, ISBN: 071905948-8. Cloth: \$74.95, ISBN: 071905947-X.

Stacey Peebles

The universe is no narrow thing,” opines Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, and neither, it might be noted, is a Cormac McCarthy novel. His eight novels and two plays have inspired a wide range of questions on any number of subjects. The new anthology *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical responses to Cormac McCarthy* (Manchester University Press, 2000), edited by longtime Cormackian Rick Wallach, offers, if not definitive answers, then an equally wide-ranging collection of essays that engages McCarthy’s work on many grounds and from a variety of perspectives.

This third anthology of critical essays on McCarthy includes several previously published works that have been heretofore somewhat difficult to find. These include Edwin T. Arnold’s “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Stonemason*: the unmaking of a play,” in which he details the failed attempt by Washington’s Arena Stage to perform the play, and Terri Witek’s linguistic examination of the author’s prose, “‘He’s hell when he’s well’: Cormac McCarthy’s rhyming dictions.” Both of these essays, first published in 1995 and 1991 respectively, have become essential reading for McCarthy scholars and enthusiasts. The anthology also includes a variety of theoretical approaches, which are excellently executed readings such as Nell Sullivan’s feminist piece “The Evolution of the Dead Girlfriend Motif in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*” and Dave Holloway’s Marxist analysis “‘A false book is no book at all’: the Ideology of Representation in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy.”

Each work by McCarthy has at least one or two essays devoted to it here, and Wallach and Dianne C. Luce also address Cormac McCarthy’s two short stories, “Wake for Susan” and “A Drowning Incident,” hard-to-find pieces that have only been published in a literary supplement to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville’s student magazine *The Phoenix* in 1959 and 1960. This collection is also the first to be published following the completion of the Border Trilogy, and it contains several essays dedicated to McCarthy’s complete canon as well as a substantial final section dedicated to what Wallach dubs the “Border Tetralogy”: *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*. Highlights here include Mark Busby’s essay on McCarthy’s border crossings, and John Wegner’s exploration of the Mexican Revolution in the Border Trilogy.

Myth, legend, dust deviates from the standard critical approach in two notable instances, nicely reflecting the broad range of academic and non-academic readers of McCarthy. Author Madison Smartt Bell kicks off the volume with his “A writer’s view of Cormac McCarthy,” and he offers reflections on McCarthy’s unique and resonant style and on the anxiety of influence affecting many contemporary authors. In my favorite turn of phrase, he memorably dubs *Suttree* a “big messy salivating hairy book,” which may not be a standard critical term but certainly ought to be. Similarly, renaissance man Peter Josyph presents a series of three meditations on *The Stonemason*, discussing in turn how he feels the play fails, and what might redeem it; this includes his well-known critique detailing why staging *The Stonemason* is a near-impossible undertaking.

Finally, the last essay of the anthology is not an essay at all but Kyle Kirves’s comprehensive list of character names in each of the eight novels, which also includes brief notes on that character’s significance and/or relationship to other characters in the book—certainly a valuable resource for anyone who’s ever sifted through the panoply of “topers, tosspots, sots and archsots” in a book like *Suttree*.

Myth, legend, dust is the broadest and most comprehensive of the critical anthologies published to date, and the collection proves an excellent counterpart to the recently revised and republished *Critical Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (1999) and the recently republished *Sacred Violence: A Reader’s Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (2001). Particularly in *Myth, legend, dust*, many of the essays are elaborations of papers presented at conferences on McCarthy’s work; participants in those conferences should recognize a number of authors and themes, while those just discovering the author will also find an excellent introduction to these issues of inquiry. The study of Cormac McCarthy’s unique and compelling work continues to evolve, and here *Myth, legend, dust* is both product and provocation.