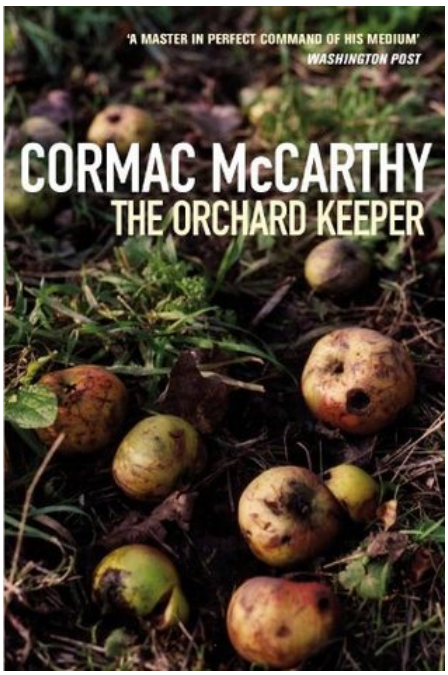

The Orchard Keeper

Cormac McCarthy

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The Orchard Keeper Cormac McCarthy
'The Orchard Keeper' tells of John Wesley Rattner, a young boy, and Marion Sylder, an outlaw and bootlegger who, unbeknownst to either of them, has killed the boy's father.

The Orchard Keeper Details

Date	:	Published August 3rd 2007 by Picador USA (first published 1965)
ISBN	:	9780330314916
Author	:	Cormac McCarthy
Format	:	Paperback 256 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Gothic, Southern Gothic, Literature, American, Novels, Literary Fiction

From Reader Review The Orchard Keeper for online ebook

Cody says

Color rating: Mauve

There are a lot of reviews that mention the difference between this and McCarthy's later work. It's undeniably true that this is a tonal anomaly; the cadence is yet to be developed, the trademark dialogue is almost entirely absent along with the heavy religiosity. Hell, even the flora gets short shrift. All things considered, however, *The Orchard Keeper* is a fine first novel that demonstrates pure ambition, a deftness of language in the upper one-percentile, and…*I just don't give a shit at all*. No joke. I have to say that if the author's name wasn't on the cover, this book would be ripe for obscurists and Gothic fetishists alone. This isn't bashing—it's honesty. I'm not a McCarthy fellatist so I hope I have a bit of objectivity here. I readily cede to the man's mastery and think at least four of his novels are some of the best of the second-half of the American 20th century. I just don't drink his Kool-Aid with the aplomb that I suck at the prodigious wells of Pynchon, McElroy, DeLillo, Vollmann, etc. Again, this is just personal opinion. No need to send the Judge.

My main issue is that there is nothing that really compels the story forward. Three stories lines weaving and bobbing within and around one another proves (at least) two too many for McCarthy here. The book really is remarkable in just how unremarkable it is. It's the rarest thing in his canon: completely forgettable. I just finished the damned thing and I couldn't tell you a whole lot about it. I am, of course, on a strong regimen of memory-erasing pharmacopeia to cope with the necessities of modernity (a phone in your pocket!), but I tend to remember quite a bit about books (especially ones I've just finished). Although McCarthy would emerge with a crystalline voice in his very next offering, *The Orchard Keeper* seems like little more to me than a Vaseline smear across the lens of some antiquated Southern camera whose aperture is perpetually set to 'underwhelming.'

JBedient says

I don't believe in beach books, or airplane books, or the like, when I read I like to be challenged a little, but I have to admit this book was quite a difficult and complex read for me - perhaps too challenging in parts. I found myself rereading certain passages (sometimes because they were stunningly beautiful), restarting chapters, and flipping back a few pages because what I had just read was a blur in my mind. The way the narrative is presented here is a little disorientating and I think anybody who reads it once and says they grasp the full themes of the tale told here is just full of malarkey. I think McCarthy is mainly saying something about fatherhood... patriarchy, I don't know for sure.

This was for me a book I need to read again to get the full grasp of its themes, however the plot is somewhat straightforward and simple: The story takes place during the inter-war years in an isolated fictional community in Tennessee. The book opens and ends with two very beautiful bookends. I won't reveal the final bookend, but it is connected to the opening one, which is a great metaphorical scene of two African American cemetary workers who are attempting to cut through a tree and discover that an iron fence has grown through it - something man-made ripping through and destroying nature. This is a novel about nature and man, and about the nature of man.

The story deals primarily with three men: John Wesley Ratner, a fatherless young man coming of age, and his relationship to two men - Marion Sylder, a bootlegger, and Arther Ownby, an old hermit. They are connected through the death of Kenneth Rattner, John Wesley's estranged father, who Sylder has murdered in self defense and has dumped his body into an orchard pit looked over by Ownby, who finds the body, and takes it upon himself to be its caretaker. The dead man, unbeknownst to John Wesley, Sylder, or Ownby, becomes an invisible link uniting them all. The story is about the relationship of these three men and their unseen inter-connectedness to the body. These protagonists are never fully aware of how they are connected, which makes for an interesting framework, and sets the stage for McCarthy to interject his style. This story doesn't just take place in a time and space between the great World Wars - this storytelling is all myth and legend, the time of place an epoch connected to the eons, and McCarthy tells the story in such a way that makes you feel these characters are mythic spirits acting out a drama born from time itself...

A tough read, but full of gorgeous passages and bizarre colloquialisms... highly recommended.

Josh says

When reading a McCarthy book, you already know what you're going to get: an obscure and erudite vocabulary full of comprehensive description; from the height of a tree, to the striations on the leaves, nothing left to ponder.

McCarthy is more about quality over quantity, yet the reader yearns for more. With it being his first novel, it displays much talent and what would eventually become an amazing literary career.

Probably a great starting point for anyone venturing out into one of his back-wood Appalachian microcosms.

Orsodimondo says

VANGELO NERO
McCarthy al debutto, il suo primo romanzo, targato 1965. Pubblicato dalla Random House, la stessa casa editrice di Faulkner, scrittore al quale McCarthy viene spesso avvicinato.
All’epoca, McCarthy lavorava come meccanico a Chicago: come altri scrittori americani del Novecento, McCarthy viene dal lavoro manuale, non è un intellettuale.

La storia è ambientata al sud, in una comunità rurale del Tennessee, che sembra appartenere a un’altra epoca, più remota e più primitiva. Si svolge negli anni del proibizionismo a cavallo tra le due guerre mondiali. Nostalgia per i valori che si perdono con la modernità e il progresso, con l’industrializzazione.

Il vecchio Ather vive in una capanna che ha costruito lui stesso e vive barattando radici; un giovane, John Wesley Rattner che vive in vece barattando pelli di animali che caccia lui stesso per lo più con le trappole; Marion Syleder è invece un contrabbandiere di whiskey, e data l’epoca e l’ambientazione, non poteva certo mancare.

Da una vasca d’acqua emerge il cadavere di una persona, la polizia (la Legge) se ne occupa blandamente, senza decisione, come se non volesse scoprire la verità, o la temesse. Come se la verità potesse incrinare lo statu quo.

C’è abbondanza di segni di quella che sarà poi la sua arte nelle opere più riuscite, soprattutto l’attenzione alla natura, per nulla tenera, piuttosto ostile e violenta, ma a suo modo giusta, in quanto ‘naturale’ - s’intravede quella rudezza che è propria della società americana - la differenza tra vittime e carnefici è sfumata, storia scrittura e tono sono duri, aspri.

Ma non c’è niente da fare, è un esordio estremamente deludente, perfino noioso, con personaggi sfocati, gran guignol a gogò, situazioni al limite della credibilità.

James Franco, regista, e Scott Haze, protagonista, sul set del film “Figlio di dio” del 2013, tratto da un altro romanzo di Cormac McCarthy.

Evan Leach says

On the list of best books I’ve ever read, *Blood Meridian* would be near the top (if you put the proverbial gun to my head, I’d probably put it **at** the top). However, I’d only read two of McCarthy’s novels before this year: *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*. One of my personal goals for 2016 is to take a deep dive into McCarthy’s back catalog. I started at the beginning with *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy’s first published novel.

The story centers around three characters living in the 1930’s: a young boy, a bootlegger who (unbeknownst to the boy) murdered the boy’s father, and an old hermit. I would not call this a plot-driven novel by any stretch. The book just sort of meanders from character to character; if there is a central thread here, I’d probably define it as a study of a world that time has passed by (both from a cultural standpoint and a physical one), but it’s certainly not heavy-handed in that respect. For the most part, McCarthy seems to simply drift around as the spirit moves him, which is just fine by me.

Although this is McCarthy’s first book, it doesn’t really read like a debut novel. McCarthy doesn’t seem like he’s finding his way as a writer here; it’s as if his famous style wasn’t so much honed over time, but was always an elemental piece of the author. Readers that have read his more famous works and enjoy McCarthy’s writing will be happily at home here: the dialogue is great, the love for and descriptions of nature are lavish and evocative, and the insights into human nature are razor sharp and unflinching. This book is a bit disjointed, and I don’t know if it would have worked as a 400 page novel, but at under 250 pages the frequent digressions felt interesting instead of maddening.

This was not as epic as *Blood Meridian*, and McCarthy’s best was yet to come. But I was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed this debut. **4.0 stars**, recommended for fans of McCarthy’s more famous works.

Wayne Barrett says

It was never my intention to do it this way but up to this point I've read all of McCarthy's books except this one. So it happens that the last of his novels I've read is the first he wrote. Because of that, it is difficult to rate this one. I can still sense the greatness of his unique style, but because I have read his following masterpieces, they are naturally what I use as a measuring stick for his work and "The Orchard Keeper" just doesn't hold up to any of his later work.

There is a part of me that wishes I would not have saved this one for last because I was disappointed, but then again, had I read this one first I might not have been so eager to read more of his books.

Just to clarify, I was disappointed only because this book was not as great as most of his others, but that does not mean I think this is a bad book. It certainly isn't for everyone. Then again, that's usually said about all his work, even his great ones.

I know Cormack is in his 80's now and I don't know if we will be seeing any more novels coming from him. I sure hope so. And as he did with Faulkner, I sure hope to see someone of his class fall into his footsteps.

Mindi says

I swear, you could hand me McCarthy's grocery list and I would love it. I haven't found a book of his that I didn't love, and I don't expect to in the future. I fully intend to work my way through the rest of his books by the end of the year.

The Orchard Keeper is his first book, and wow, what an amazing first book. Honestly, I didn't expect anything less. You can really tell by his later books that he fine tuned his craft, but all the elements that I love are still present in this book. Amazing, sparse, and beautiful prose? Check. Brilliant landscape and nature descriptions? Yep. Spot on dialogue that makes you feel as if you are actually in Tennessee in the late 1930's? Again, yes.

The Orchard Keeper revolves around 3 main characters living in rural Tennessee between the world wars. Marion Sylder is a bootlegger, Uncle Ather is an old hermit, and John Wesley Rattner is a young man who lost his father suddenly. Circumstances bring all three men together, and separately Sylder and Ather become father figures to Rattner.

I'm keeping the synopsis spoiler free, but there is an irony to these men coming together, as they are all impacted by a crime committed by Sylder. Ather becomes the keeper of this crime, while Slyder continues to run whiskey in his car and defy the law. Through all of this Rattner is unaware of the impact these two men have on his life.

People often ask me where to start with McCarthy, and I would say definitely pick up one of his later novels before attempting this one. Parts of the story can be a bit confusing at times, but it eventually all comes together, and the end result is pure McCarthy.

Lawyer says

The Orchard Keeper: ***Cormac McCarthy's first novel of a Southern Quartet***

The Orchard Keeper by Cormac McCarthy was selected by Tom "Big Daddy" Mathews as the Moderator's Choice for Members of On the Southern Literary Trail for January, 2016.

First Edition, Random House, New York, New York, 1965

Cormac McCarthy, Dust Jacket Photo, "The Orchard Keeper"

> *Them that's got shall get*
> *Them that's not shall lose*
> *So the Bible said and it still is news*
> *Mama may have Papa may have*
> *But God bless the child that's got his own*
> *That's got his own*--Billie Holliday, God Bless the Child, 1941

You have to read this book. I rarely say it. I feel so strongly about it, I'll say it again. Read this book. Read it straight through. Then read it more thoroughly, more thoughtfully. See how Cormac McCarthy put this story together.

The hill country of Eastern Tennessee has always been different. During the American Civil War, the mountainous areas of Tennessee were a hotbed of Unionism.

Set in Red Branch, Tennessee, Cormac McCarthy created a community that portrayed the independence of the residents of that area of the state. Red Branch is located somewhere between Knoxville and Sevierville in Tennessee. The time of the story is between World War I and World War II.

The people of Red Branch are a close knit bunch. It's a place of hospitality if you're one of their own. If you're not from around there, you're not likely to be welcome. If you're a member of the Alcohol and Tobacco Unit of the Federal government, don't expect a whole lot of information about who is running whiskey out of the Tennessee Hills.

Folks in Red Branch do what comes naturally. Sex is a gift to be engaged in and enjoyed. The young women are just as willing and eager as the young men are to enjoy one another. Young Josh Tipton, a bit player in the overall scheme of things, is humiliated that his young lady insults him by telling him he's the nicest young man that ever needled her. Perhaps he's insulted to be a nice young man. But considering McCarthy's comedic moments, it's more likely Josh's humiliation over the needle size of his pride and joy.

A quick read, The Orchard Keeper, at first blush is a simple enough tale. There are three main protagonists, Marion Sylder, a bad boy not above breaking the law by running unbranded whiskey out of the hills in fast

cars; Uncle Ather Ownby, who tends a ruined apple orchard, a hermit, content to live alone away from the encroachment of civilization, and young John Rattney, a fatherless boy, who comes to be fostered and mentored by both Sylder and Ownby.

McCarthy writes of a land and a people fast changing. What was once unblemished forested mountainsides is being encroached upon by progress. Or so some would call it. McCarthy intimates it is a present fast forgetting the past.

> ***"They are gone now. Fled, banished in death or exile, lost, undone. Over the land sun and wind still move to burn and sway the trees, the grasses. No avatar, no scion, no vestige of that people remains. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust."***

John's last memory of his father, Kenneth, is being given an orange drink by his father, purchased for a nickel, before his father left for South Carolina in search of a job. It's the last time John ever sees his father.

John's mother reminds him that his father was a hero in the army, returning from service with a platinum plate in his skull. She also tells him that if only his father were there, neither he nor she would want for anything, for his father had always been a good provider. Evidence is to the contrary.

Kenneth Rattney was no hero. He was a con man and a thief, always on the lookout for an easy buck. Whether he came by it honestly or not, he didn't care.

Kenneth hitches a ride with Marion Sylder, who is coming back home to Red Branch after an absence of five years. Sylder's driving a new black Ford coupe. He's well dressed. Rattney's wrong when he decides Sylder's an easy mark. When Sylder has a flat, Rattney attacks him with a tire iron. Sylder kills him in self defense, disposing of his body by rolling him off the road where the body lands in the old spray pit of the gnarled and ruined orchard tended by Uncle Ather. Sylder has no idea whose body he's rolled off the road.

Uncle Ather, walking through his ruined orchard discovers Rattner's body floating in the old spray pit. Ather's learned a long time ago that bringing in the authorities is only going to lead to meddling. He hides the body, piling cut cedar trees over the old pit. Neither does Ather know the identity of the body floating in the pit.

Back at the rickety shack John and his mother occupy, John is drawn into the nature of the wilderness that surrounds him. He moves his bed to the enclosed porch of the house, watching the change of the seasons. His mother, for all purposes, a widow, leaves John to his own devises. John does not attend school. No truant officers exist to drag him away from his wandering through the woods that surround him.

During his regular walks through the remarkable landscape in which he lives, John meets both Marion Sylder and Uncle Ather. Both become mentors, essentially foster fathers to him.

John watches Sylder slide through a curve, plunging into a swift running creek. He pulls him from his car. Sylder realizes the boy saved his life and he returns the favor by seeing the boy share the comfort of his home, supplies him with enough money to increase the string of his traps with which he wishes to earn money for his mother's support, and gives the boy his first dog.

Uncle Ather is a fount of folkways and woodlore. He is a natural storyteller, a man seemingly older than the hills he wanders. Ather still remembers when civilization was so distant that "painters," or panthers, regularly roamed the woods, their screams piercing the black night unlit by a distant civilization.

However, society is changing. There is no place for characters such as Marion Sylder and Uncle Ather Ownby. Running unbranded, or shall we say, untaxed whiskey, isn't good for Government Revenue. Sheriff Gifford, the symbol of government authority is on the lookout for Sylder. Ather calls the law down on himself when he shoots up a tank put up on one of his beloved mountains by the United States Army.

John Rattner remains loyal to both his friends as the law closes in on them. McCarthy makes it clear that both bootlegger and mountain hermit can be fathers of greater influence than a man who merely fertilizes an egg.

What first appears to be a relatively simple plot is not as simple as it appears. Just who is the narrator of this tale? Is this an unknown, omniscient narrator, speaking to us in the third person? Or, is this a classic bildungsroman told by an older, wiser John Rattner?

McCarthy created a remarkable story with his debut. The language of the hill people is pitch perfect. His prose describing the Tennessee hill country is more poetry in the indelible beauty of a vanishing world captured forever on the page.

McCarthy's manuscript landed on the desk of Albert Erskine at Random House. Erskine had been Faulkner's editor. As he read McCarthy's manuscript, I wonder if Erskine at times questioned whether Bill Faulkner ever died. I can see Erskine shaking his head in wonder at the words on the rough manuscript that a new Southern voice had produced.

McCarthy was seen as the heir apparent to William Faulkner. Orville Prescott, reviewing *The Orchard Keeper* noted that the author had read much Faulkner. And imitated him much. Yet, Prescott found a raw narrative power in this first novel. *Prescott, O., Still Another Disciple of William Faulkner, The New York Times, May 1965*

In 1966, the William Faulkner Foundation selected McCarthy as the author of the most notable novel. Rightly so.

Abram Dorrough says

Oh, how this book makes me envy McCarthy's literary genius more than ever before. This cannot be a first novel. "The Orchard Keeper" is too well developed to have been a first finished effort.

McCarthy must have half a dozen other initial attempts cached away in a desk drawer somewhere - rough drafts that nobody has ever seen. Assuming this book actually is his first book - which it unbelievably is - McCarthy certainly established his inimitable voice and style from the get-go. I'm quite astonished. He has

always been slow, deliberate, beautiful, cautious, descriptive, and he has always been expertly so.

Surprisingly, despite the fact that I thoroughly enjoy this book, I would call it my least favorite McCarthy novel. The prose, though stunning overall, does experience a few (only a select few) minor slips in the book, and the work isn't quite as polished as his others overall. For example, in no other McCarthy book will you find a phrase as ambiguous as "evil-looking". Still, for McCarthy to have established himself as resoundingly as he did with his very first publication is highly impressive, and I thoroughly enjoy "The Orchard Keeper". The last lines are haunting...

Tamara says

There's no question McCarthy is a brilliant prose writer. There are times when I stop in reading to marvel at his stunning verbal combinations. However the subject matter of this book just didn't appeal to me and I found the density of description overwhelming to the plot and actual characters. I knew exactly what everything looked like, smelled like, moved like, sounded like, etc, but for a good chunk of it i wouldn't have been able to tell you what was actually going on and how it related to anything else. I appreciate the man's talent and am certainly interested to read his other works, but this book left me rather cold.

Nuno Simões says

narrativa enrolada, algo confusa. tem alguns momentos interessantes ainda assim (no início e no fim). vale sobretudo pelos traços de escrita do autor, que aprecio.

FrankH says

Club Read: On the Southern Literary Trail

By the time he left the road and entered the woods they were coming down, the dead and leafless trunks, grasping with brittle gray fingers and going prone on the earth with muffled thunder of their fall half lost in the fulminations overhead. The old man kept to his course, over last year's leaves slick with water, hopping and dancing wildly among the maelstrom of riotous greenery like some rain sprite, burned out of near-darkness in antic configuration against the quick bloom of the lightning. As he passed it thus a barren chestnut silver under the sluice of rain erupted to the heart and spewed out sawdust and scorched mice upon him. A slab fell away with a long hiss like a burning mast tilting seaward. He is down. A clash of shields rings and Valkyrie descend with cat's cries to bear him away. Already a rivulet is packing clay in one ragged cuff and a quiff of white hair depending (sic) from his forelock reddens in the seeping mud

As an opening caveat on the *experience* of reading "The Orchard Keeper", readers can expect to spend lots of time keeping tabs on folks wandering about in the rain-soaked woods. The Depression-era setting is the southern Appalachian community of Red Branch, near the city of Knoxville, TN. The characters are hill people and they're not really wandering, it just seems that way because McCarthy's style often precludes the narrative voice from exposing the reader to simple statements of intent. Expository declarations -- something

like "The boy went to check his coon trap near the stream bank" as a made-up example -- are not permitted to intrude upon McCarthy's brilliantly gnarled diction that keeps us focused on the wooded mountain terrain rather than on what those who are on it may be doing.

Hard to describe the nature of that diction: For sure, it's sometimes difficult to follow* . You think of it initially as highly naturalistic, with the occasional "neo-Biblical" embellishment. Some have likened McCarthy's writing to the obsessively detailed "mythopoetic" style of Faulkner or working towards a gothic version of pathetic fallacy in which startling elements of nature mirror the inner emotions and turmoil of the characters. Whatever it is, its power to render and turbo-charge the natural into the *super*natural -- as the above passage suggests --can be formidable.

In this his first novel though, McCarthy's linguistic style manifests, arguably, as over-weighted, even inimical to the needs of plot and character development.

The Stealth of the Panther

McCarthy is working mostly here in a devotional mode to landscape and setting, and, as result, the other story elements feel thin and disjunctive. Instead of fully-developed narratives and characters with histories, we have large gaps in exposition, the author coming to certain elements of the story material at odd angles while short-changing the rest. The title, for instance, would suggest the presence of an orchard and its steward, yet there's little in the way of text to support either idea. Major characters become known to the readers only by a highly selective rendering of their history. Ill-fitting pieces of stand-alone text don't lead anywhere or resonate thematically; in this regard, the appearance -- and quick disappearance -- of the nubile Wanita Tipton comes to mind, along with the amusing but extraneous Green Fly Inn passages and the book's prelude depicting men laboring -- to what end remains hazy -- as they separate a large tree from a metal fence embedded in its trunk. For some reason, the italicized sections in TOK (flashbacks?) especially work to undermine continuity and I often struggled to see how they hooked up with the other plot elements.

It was only after completing more than half of the novel that I realized TOK's essential story concerns how a young boy's search for identity becomes shaped by the intercession of two native mountain men at very different stages of their lives.

"The old man" is Arthur Ownby. As a young man, deeply in debt, Ownby lost his small farm -- and his wife -- after a "painter" (panther) silently killed off most of his livestock; many decades later, as an indigent recluse, he's madly shooting holes into a large tank the government built near his dilapidated home. We know little of what happened in the intervening years or why he's now damaging government property. McCarthy here may be inviting the reader to extrapolate from the ill-used trope of the poor southern hillbilly but this huge gap in character history means the reader has no *textual* basis for figuring out the reasons behind Ownby's needful state, let alone the anti-government fulminations. When Ownby finds a dead body in a woodland pit adjoining some fruit trees, he neither removes the body nor reports it to the authorities, yet another normative breach. As a result, an odious biological rot permeates the area, a symbol the author exploits to great effect.

At the other end of the age spectrum, the ambitious, young carpenter Marion Sylder holds down a job building poorly constructed area homes, yet -- for reasons not known -- decides to leave Red Branch and head off for parts undisclosed. Five years later Sylder's back, with neither he nor McCarthy having a story to tell. After a stint working at a nearby fertilizer factory, Sylder takes up running illegal whiskey for a man

named Garland Hobie, the last of a mountain family with a long history of moonshining. One night transporting his illicit cargo of alcohol, Sylder runs his Plymouth coupe off a road and into a swamp; a young boy named John Wesley Rattner comes along to pull the injured Sylder out of wreck. After getting patched up, Marion recognizes the boy is badly in need of a step-father and gifts him a hunting puppy, part bluetick, part walker, from a litter he's bred at his home. Later, McCarthy puts boy and surrogate dad out together in the woods on a hunt for raccoons; the bond between man and boy grows stronger.

At the start of novel, of course, Sylder behaves like a good-natured, good-ole boy who enjoys nothing better than making good money, honkey-tonking with his buddies and racing through the hollows in a fast car. Surprising then that dog breeder should be on his resume. Well into the novel we learn another surprising fact: Sylder's got a wife, back there at home, with the dogs. How and when did this all happen? It's yet another development hole.

DadKiller

The boy John Wesley, the heart of this novel, shows a keen interest in woodlore and hunting, often scouting out secret forts and caves in the forest with his friends. He takes a shine to Ownby and is fond of conversing with the old man and hearing his tales of "painters" and how things went down back in the day. John Wesley has never met his biological father, Ken Rattner, who deserted the family shortly after JW's birth; though husband Rattner promised his wife he'd return, we learn later he's wanted by authorities in three states. McCarthy wants to add a layer of irony here -- unbeknownst to John Wesley, Sylder recently killed Ken Rattner in a long and violent fight and dumped his body, *the* body, into a pit near the Ownby "orchard". The author now means for us to see Sylder as mentoring DadKiller.

This ironic development is extended and broadened as the story reaches it climax. In the middle of the night, Sylder comes to the home of Red Branch officer Jefferson Gifford and begins punching him as payback for the trouble he's caused John Wesley when the boy deployed hunting traps without a license. This, along with the charge of illegal whiskey running, gets Sylder some cuts and bruises and a three-year sentence to the state prison. In his detention cell, Marion sends off the visiting John Wesley with a gritty soliloquy about hard-knocks justice and how it would be prudent for the two of them to steer clear of each other. In the meantime, a special agent brings in Ownby to answer for shooting at local police investigating the tank incident. A judge commits him to the state mental institution in Brushy Mountain.

John Wesley, it seems, has come up short in the Dad lottery: he's got one feckless criminal, who happens to be dead, one GU criminal that wants nothing to do with him, and an old bird deemed by the state to be mentally incompetent. Any mentoring by this bunch can't be anything *but* ironic.

Unfortunately, this underlayment of irony winds up losing much of its impact as an element of story-making because the author has not allocated it enough pages nor given it the legs to get out in front of all the dense, naturalistic imaging concentrating in the woods. Further, the three separate story components don't converge -- and thus build -- in a straight-forward manner; rather they are delivered at intervals as separate pieces falling in between the stylized treatments of setting, thus constraining the inherent dramatic momentum emerging from John Wesley's plight.

Of Two Minds

Perhaps the most fundamental problem with TOK, though, lies in the nature of McCarthy's conflicted approach to theme. At the start of the novel, he provides this as cultural commentary on the hill folk of Red Branch:

They were...families of gaunt hollow-eyed and dark-skinned people, not Melungeons and not exactly anything else,..devoted to the production of a ragged line of scions which shoeless and tattered sat for hours at a time on the porch edges, themselves not unlike the victims of some terrible disaster and stared out across the blighted land with expressions of neither hope or wonder nor despair....Only the names of the mailboxes altered, the new ones lettered crudely in above a rack of paints smears that obliterated the former occupants back into the anonymity from which they sprang.

Yet, at the end of the story, with John Wesley at the burial site of his Mom sometime after the Second World War, we get a coda to the storyline, the author's parting words:

No avatar, no scion, no vestige of that people remains. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are ***myth, legend*** *and dust.*

What myth? What legend? Surely these are not the artifacts of the "shoeless and tattered" staring out across a blighted land. There's nothing mythical or legendary about the behavior of Sylder, Ownby or John Wesley in this novel. Perhaps, for McCarthy, it's the physical country that's mythical and legendary. This runs counter to the standard belief that human beings, not rocks and trees, are the stuff of legend and myth. Note to CM: If you want legend and myth, *dramatize* human beings becoming heroes by what they do. Turn Garland Hobie, say, into a Tennessee version of Booker Noe or model Sylder, the "runner", after Junior Johnson. And leave out the tales about burning down black churches.

Who Is the Orchard Keeper?

The book's title best captures McCarthy's ambivalence about the kind of story he's telling. Orchards usually do not thrive in the wild. They are the construct of humans, specifically farmers who year after year plant seeds, manage the land, and battle pests and droughts before obtaining a decent return. This level of effort is far beyond Ownby's ken as steward, whether young or old: by his own admission, his skills as a wife and livestock "keeper" proved to be mediocre at best. On some level, McCarthy understands Ownby can't be a "Keeper" and it's a tragic irony -- that word again -- he's been appointed -- or appointed himself -- as heir to the orchard. Yet, somehow, it also feels like the author wants us to join John Wesley and his friends and go all-in for the idea that Ownby represents a spirit or set of values, which when gone, will be a great loss to the world. Sorry, the text of the novel simply does not support it. Ownby is a failure and has failed the ultimate test: Change. Like that other stuff, it happens. Get over yourself, Mr. Ownby, by moving on. Clean up the mess in your front yard, put down the gun, and make a better place in the world.

You read this book either as an ill-constructed homage to a tired idea of the Southern past or as a dark joke on those mountain folk who still believe in it.

Hard Times in Eastern Tennessee

After completing the novel, I became curious about the plot detail which has John Wesley bringing a dead sparrow hawk to an office in Knoxville and being paid one dollar for it. I googled the history of Tennessee in the thirties and though I couldn't find anything specific on animal management programs, there's no question this was a time of great change and challenge in the hill country. In trying to address economic hardship exacerbated by the Depression, forest and land management initiatives from the federal New Deal, along with the TVA project, created great upheaval in the way of property transfer and disruption in agrarian and mountain life. The link below may be of interest to readers. Note this history suggests that, due to over-logging and the impact of unregulated coal mining in the twenties, the eastern Tennessee of the early

twentieth century did not seem likely to inspire much in the way of fond nostalgia.

http://www.foresthistory.org/ASPNET/P...

**As Moderator Tom indicates, McCarthy's ambiguous, missing or delayed antecedents, the ones linked to character or agency, do indeed make for vexing reading. At one point in the second half of the novel, I plodded through a page of scene-building before I realized that the subject of the author's earlier pronoun was a feral cat moving about in the rain. Cats haunt the imagination of the book's central character, Arthur Ownby, and, to be fair about it, my close attention to detail at that late point in the narrative was well south of a hundred percent. Still, way it usually works, pronouns should come after* the nouns, not before. It is in the reader's DNA to be disinclined to parse the second or third sentence in order to fully understand the first

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Szplug says

A truly intriguing and beautifully depicted but ultimately unsatisfying debut from McCarthy which arrived draped in keen, vibrant colours, with lush, fragrant descriptions of the gorgeous Tennessee landscape, earthy watercolour portraits of its taciturn characters, and the leisured pace of an Appalachian highway that tunnels through the overhanging, rainbow-spiked autumnal woods, emerging every now and then, sun-dappled and redolent of honey and cider, into the fresh breezes of open space—and yet those shimmery blacktops cutting across the narrative set pieces portend of imminent resolutions that never actually materialize.

The plot? Whatever. This book was meant to be admired, not explained. Damaged male characters stoically interact with each other in monotonic and monosyllabic word stutters, closed upon their pain and unaware of the bemused joke fate is playing with them; and while the cliff-edge tavern that occupies the opening section of the novel—perched precariously above a Tennessean gorge down into which the empty bottles from a night's carousing are sent in spinning free fall—is one of the most amazing drinkeries I've come across in my fictional forays, it charges the novelistic air with a humming energy that gradually and imperceptibly expends itself over the more subdued and sober pages that follow such that they oddly come to seem like a drawn-out epilogue. Thus, heavily under the spell of Faulkner and already imbued with impressive descriptive prowess, McCarthy had no compelling story to drive his impeccably pungent writing, a situation he would remedy in his threnodic sophomore effort *Outer Dark* and achieve near-perfection with in *Blood Meridian*. Read *The Orchard Keeper* to be impressed by McCarthy's raw talent, not to be entertained.

Matt says

I was a little worried going into this book because it is very common for a writer's first novel to not be a good representation of that person's entire body of work. This is often true with even the writers who go on to be canonized legends, as more often than not it takes them about two or three books to really get their literary sea legs.

While *The Orchard Keeper* isn't quite at the level of *Blood Meridian* or *Suttree*, I'm still convinced that Cormac McCarthy sprang from the womb clutching a portable typewriter. Almost everything that people love about McCarthy's work can be found gestating within these pages. There are the beautifully rich descriptions of environmental scenery set alongside both humorous and sorrowful depictions of the grotesqueries of human behavior. These are two areas where McCarthy always shines. Also evident is his massive vocabulary and love of arcane words. I just have to believe that as a child Cormac asked for a pony one Christmas and got the unabridged Oxford English Dictionary instead.

Even though there are some definite signs of where McCarthy's writing style was going later on in his career, there where also a few things present that surprised me. There are many commas in this book for starters. Also his characters speak in a heavy Southern vernacular – something that he seemed to minimize the use of as he went on. There are also instances where the narrative drifts into a character's internal monologue and this is denoted by blocks of italicized text. This is an old Faulkner trick from way back. Part of me wonders if McCarthy was trying to intentionally fashion himself after Faulkner or if these mechanizations were at the behest of his editor. Albert Erskine edited Faulkner's last few books late in his career and then went on to edit several of McCarthy's early works.

The story follows three men in the Appalachian area somewhere near Knoxville, TN. John Wesley Rattner is a teenaged boy without a father who is confused about both where he belongs in the world as well as with the sexual stirrings that he is beginning to feel. Marion Sylder is a hot shot liquor bootlegger. Arthur Owenbey (aka Uncle Ather) is an old hermit who lives out in the woods near the mountains. Young Rattner's friendship with both men provides for a brotherhood of the forsaken, or possibly a glimpse into how communities took care of their own in more simple times. In the two older men the reader is shown a rugged individualism and resentment of government authority that took root in the South from the fallout of the Civil War if not long before, possibly even a remnant from the era of indentured servitude. My favorite character was Uncle Ather, as he seemed to embody a similar defeated wisdom as Sheriff Bell in *No Country for Old Men.*

I stumbled across this 1965 New York Times review of this book online:
http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17...

Holy hell. While not completely scathing, I can still here the prick tones in Orville's voice loud and clear. One of the things that so intrigues fans of McCarthy is his reticence to put himself in the media spotlight or reveal more than the most basic details about his personal life. This sort of behavior seems so odd because at some level one has to believe that part of the reason a person strives to become a published author is because some small part of that person desires something approaching fame or at the very least, recognition that leads to financial security. It is interesting to ponder whether or not Cormac McCarthy was simply not wired in that sort of way or if a few early reviews like the one above turned him against the idea. I'm glad he didn't stop writing, but at the same time I'm a little nervous about having burned through everything of his with the exception of the Border Trilogy. I hope he lives to be a very money-hungry one hundred and twenty year old.

Mike Puma says

Face it GoodReaders—Cormac McCarthy isn't for everyone. I doubt it was ever his intention. He doesn't write for the casual reader, or even the avid reader. I think he writes primarily for himself, and gets rather a kick out of those of us who follow his every word and enjoy it for what it is. Like any artist, he creates a work, makes it available to a public, and moves on. He's seemingly uninterested in what people think of his work, or in discussing his work, or its popularity. Reception to his work runs the gamut: from the high praise of the eggheads (critics) and wanna-be eggheads, like myself, to the braying of the rabble: "it's boring," "what's with that punctuation?" "he makes up words." Comments like those suggest to me that a reader has read the wrong book; they say more about the reader than the text. Before I'm bashed for my arrogance, I concede that *any* reaction to a work of art is valid; it is what it is. BUT, a reaction doesn't define a work; it merely says something about the observer. No book will ever appeal to everyone.

That said, McCarthy does resonate well with 'serious' critics—there are numerous volumes of literary criticism dedicated to his work. I suspect he's better represented among current literary criticism than most contemporary writers because the writers of literary criticism often share and appreciate the same language and tradition.

McCarthy drives the plot-driven readers crazy. His novels aren't without plot, but they're often not plot-driven. A recapitulation of the story cannot convey the experience of reading McCarthy. His characterization often requires the participation of the reader, building on minimal dialogue, frequently minimal action, and the reader's sense of self and stereotype (come on! Any domestic reader will conjure a vision of the characters from McCarthy's 'Tennessee period'). His novels are ALWAYS vividly situated with incredible images of place.

One week into the new year, and I've finished my first title—a rereading of this one. Staggering. I liked it even better this time around, although I'm sticking with my original rating. Not my favorite McCarthy, but it is everything I like most about his work. Relentless language, relentless storytelling…poetic, hyper-masculine, storytelling for the sake of the telling rather than the sake of the story. It is my intention to reread all his fiction and dramatic works over the coming year, as well as, the volumes of criticism I've acquired and have yet to read. One per month seems reasonable and without risk of burnout or wrist-slashing depression. Boy howdy!

Diane Barnes says

I am not a McCarthy fan, having read 1 of his books (All the Pretty Horses), and putting aside another (Suttree) after just a few chapters. His vision is bleak and depressing, and his themes seem to run to "live, suffer and die".

But,oh my God, this was a good book!

The lyrical language and description of nature pulled me in. The dialogue of the isolated, uneducated,

Tennessee mountain people kept me there. The rough characters who found a way to survive by any means kept me rooting for them, even though I new it would end badly for most, if not all of them. I was so rooting for the old man, Uncle Ather, to escape into the Harrykin and live out his few years as he saw fit. McCarthy couldn't even allow that, choosing to give him (and his dog) the hopeless conclusion that seems to be his trademark. Life is hard, and never gets better, he constantly tells us. That's why I am not a McCarthy fan.

But, oh my God, this was a great book!

As another reviewer pointed out, the beauty of McCarthy's prose was worth the bleak and harrowing lives of his characters, but he had to temper his novels with others that were gentler, with some redemption involved. I don't know if I'll read another of his novels, but I am very happy that I read this one, his first, written 50 years ago.

Oh my God what a book!

Darwin8u says

"They are gone now. Fled, banished in death or exile, lost, undone. Over the land sun and wind still move to burn and sway the trees, the grasses. No avatar, no scion, no vestige of that people remains. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust."
-- Cormac McCarthy, The Orchard Keeper

McCarthy is at a natural disadvantage when an obsessive reader finally works back to his first book. Invariably, McCarthy will be unfairly graded against his own amazing later output. I liked *Orchard Keeper*. I really did. It was superior in almost every way that matters to most serious writing out there, but it just didn't hold up against other McCarthy novels. If one considers *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian* to be his masterpieces (and thus 5 stars), and *The Road* , *No Country for Old Men* and *All the Pretty Horses* to be solid pieces of American literature (all 4 stars), it is unavoidable that the *Orchard Keeper* rates only three.

The great thing about reading this first McCarthy is you can see the germs of all of McCarthy's potential built into it. It contains the strange embryo of all of McCarthy's future greatness: his great mythic prose, amazing archetypal characters, beautifully grand, natural scenes. If you love McCarthy, please don't skip *the Orchard Keeper*, just don't expect it to knock you down, and chill you to the bone, and blow you away like *Blood Meridian* or *Suttree*.

Abailart says

McCarthy's fisrt novel, the third of his I have read. All the signs are there! Writing without borders, dimensional shifts, thick, dreamlike. The Old Testament prophetic tone, the lyrical imagery as if somehow nature is expressing itself, and somehow too the sense that in each filmic detail, each auditory beat, you've been there to know it. Of people who were not very much in a sort of boggy, muddy, place that wasn't too much - like rubbish, always there, always, but never lasting - noticed, remarked. Of story, little, that revolves around a corpse weighted with Greek significance; memorable cameo scenes and episodes, conversations,

exact dialects; animal movements and walks and animal skinned people shuffling or maybe walking like a cat, that may be this kind or worth of cat or not (an important 'character' the cat here). Take a bit of history's dirt, blow on it, then it's alive and then gone, tragic really.

Casey says

Blame it on Faulkner. You can't write a novel nowadays about the South—good country people, grotesque deviants, backwoods hollers, and wide, copper-colored rivers—without being labeled *Faulkner-esque*, your work *derivative of Faulkner*, your themes and language *descended from a rich Faulknerian lineage*. It's some wonder more southern writers aren't trying to flee from under daddy F's looming shadow, the evoked comparison being just as much of a complaint half the time as it is a compliment. Yet I see the appeal of mining the grounds Faulkner just happened to stake before anyone else. The proud independence of men still attached to the land, attached to a social code that marries courtesy and unremitting retribution, the poetic language of rock and stream and briar—the legend of the South is fertile for sowing literary ambitions. Although *The Orchard Keeper*, Cormac McCarthy's first of ten novels to date, does labor under Faulkner's heavy mantle, it differentiates itself through a precision and foreboding in the tone it establishes, and a descriptive language that is almost wholly objective, yet immediately redolent and mythical.

Set in the early 30's, the story concerns a hill-born teenage boy who becomes acquainted with the man who killed his father, though neither is aware of the other's identity. Both are set in narrative orbits around Ather Ownby, the boy's aged uncle, a woodsman who lives in near seclusion by a decrepit apple orchard, who disdainfully regards the inevitable encroachment of industry, and who keeps watch over a decaying corpse that appears unexpectedly in the orchard's water-filled fertilizer pit. The drama enacted by these three characters is propelled by loyalty, independence, and endings—the ending of lives, the end of prohibition, and the quickening disappearance of mountain life and ways.

Like any regional writer, McCarthy's uses place not only as setting, but also as impetus and character. The mountain of *The Orchard Keeper* is a physical and ideological twin for Uncle Ather, mirroring appearance and staunch resistance to change:

"Hot winds come up the slope from the valley like a rancid breath, redolent of milkweed, hoglots, rotting vegetation. The red clay banks along the road are crested with withered honeysuckle, pea vines dried and sheathed in dust. By late July the corn patches stand parched and sere, stalks askew in defeat. All greens pale and dry. Clay cracks and splits in endless microcataclysm and the limestone lies about the eroded land like schools of sunning dolphin, gray channeled backs humped at the infernal sky."

In his essay, "Hamlet and His Problems," T.S. Eliot popularized the term *objective correlative*, referring a "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for [a] particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." In other words, it is impossible, in any artistic or otherwise meaningful way, to talk about emotions themselves. To be rendered truly and without sentimentalism, emotions must be couched in concrete *things*. McCarthy is adept at this, his third person narration remaining ignorant of his character's inner thoughts, the settings and situations of their lives doing all the tonal heavy-lifting.

And heavy-lifting it is. McCarthy's forte is foreboding, of violence typically, but also of the strained and incommunicable relations between family members, between strangers, and with the very earth itself--kin and blood ineffable, brutality a common threat, the line between life and death a bold, black demarcation.

Faulknerian or not, *The Orchard Keeper* reads like seeing the features of a landscape, in momentary flashes of lightening, burn brightly out of darkness.

Tom Mathews says

Forgive me if I borrow liberally from a review found in a blog written several years ago by Mookse and Gripes. The first paragraph matches my sentiments almost exactly. As with M&G, this is my seventh Cormac McCarthy novel and, like them,

> this was his most difficult yet, perhaps because much of the time I didn't really feel like I knew what was going on and didn't entirely trust that the obfuscation was with valid purpose. More than any other McCarthy novel, I had to work very hard to follow the narrative thread (or, rather, to find the narrative thread after losing it several times). There were some pay-offs, though. Well before I finished it, I already could tell it was going to be a book that I would enjoy thinking about more than I enjoyed reading it.

It's been said by more than a few that McCarthy's style is largely an imitation of William Faulkner's. Of the six other McCarthy books that I have read only one, Blood Meridian, gave me that impression but it is very evident in this, his first novel. In its review in 1965 the New York Times ticked off a long litany of Faulknerisms including *"wandering pronouns with no visible antecedents; the recondite vocabulary and coined words; the dense prose packed with elaborate figures of speech; the deliberate ambiguity, the hints and withheld information; the confusion in time and place, and the flashbacks that fail to shed much light into the intermittent gloom"*. All of these serve to make *The Orchard Keeper* an challenging book to read. Even so, it is still a fascinating and, even though I seldom reread a book that I have finished, I see myself revisiting this book at some time in the future. It is one of those books that is impossible to fully absorb with just one reading.

Set in rural Tennessee in the years between the two World Wars, this is the story of an old man, a young man and a boy who are, unbeknownst to them, linked together by an act of violence that took place years before. The old man, Ather Ownby, lives in a ramshackle cabin with no one for company but an ancient hound dog. For much of the book he is a mute witness to what goes on around him. All he wants is to be left in peace but in a world moving relentlessly into the future, this is an unlikely prospect. Marion Sylder is a bootlegger, largely because that is the only way that someone in Red Branch can make a decent living. Years before, he was assaulted by one Kenneth Rattner and ended up killing him in self-defense. Later, when he crashed his car full of whiskey upside down in a creek, he was rescued by John Wesley Rattner, a boy trying to earn money by trapping mink. None of these characters has an easy life but they all do the best they can.

This is the world that Cormac McCarthy grew up in and it is obvious that he knows it well. This book is not so much a story as a representation of the past, present and future struggling to maintain its identity in the face of a rapidly modernizing world, a common theme in many of McCarthy's books.

McCarthy does one thing in this book that I don't recall from his others. There are several stories or *anecdotes* that, while unrelated to the main story, do provide entertainment or food for thought. The prelude, for example, describes some men who are attempting to cut down a tree but are stymied because its trunk has grown around a wrought iron fence. It doesn't appear to be related to the rest of the book but McCarthy seems to enjoy throwing in bits of symbolism and lets the reader figure out what it means, if anything.

Bottom line: The Orchard Keeper, like Blood Meridian, is a book that readers will spend a lot of time reflecting on. Mookse & Gripes nailed it when they said they were more likely to enjoy thinking about it enjoyed reading it. This should not be taken as discouragement, though. The three main characters are fascinating and likeable. McCarthy's ability to bring them to life, if just for a while, is a blessing for, as he tells us, *"they are gone now. Fled, banished in death or exile, lost, undone. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust.*
