



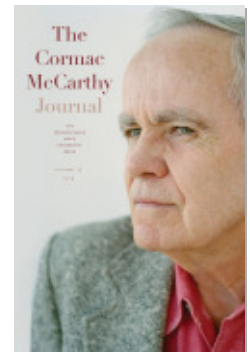
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Cormac McCarthy's House: Reading McCarthy without Walls by
Peter Josyph (review)

David N. Cremean

The Cormac McCarthy Journal, Volume 13, 2015, pp. 162-164 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press



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Peter Josyph. *Cormac McCarthy's House: Reading McCarthy without Walls*. University of Texas Press, 2013. \$29.95 hardcover. 304 pages.

Reviewed by David N. Cremean

Peter Josyph has long been an unmistakable figure, a force of nature, in McCarthian circles. Filmmaker, actor, director, painter, photographer, and writer in various genres, he has participated in McCarthy projects ranging from conference presentations and keynote addresses to visual art work (photography, painting, and film), essays, and a previous volume focused on the novelist, *Adventures in Reading Cormac McCarthy*. This latest book, which includes some previously presented or published material, follows in the same general but difficult to classify vogue as Josyph's other work on the literary titan of Tennessee, Texas, and New Mexico and as such offers erudite, interesting, and idiosyncratic if often highly debatable approaches and insights to the author. In the spirit and style of his beloved jazz, Josyph writes and riffs.

In the process, it offers a great deal not only of McCarthy but also of Josyph throughout (and to a large but far from complete extent, the McCarthy is Josyph's own). In fact, Josyph comes through not only in his writing, but likewise via other mechanisms. The book's front and rear cover sport color reproductions of two of his legion of paintings of McCarthy's former Coffin Street House in El Paso. In addition, the thirty-two interior black and white illustrations are reproductions and photographs of numerous other types, most his own works. Claims of the subtitle notwithstanding, Josyph's readings (and other, less-McCarthian material), like his paintings of the old McCarthy homestead, erect their own Josyphian walls, even though he, like Robert Frost, professes not to be enamored of walls, period.

None of the above or later qualifications or claims are intended to damn Josyph or the book with either negative criticism or faint praise. In fact, far from it. Rather, they are intended to situate and begin to create interest in the volume for potential readers, readers that should include any serious students or scholars of McCarthy. Josyph's provocative stances emerge from a lifetime of reading and artwork, and they typically offer lenses unique in McCarthiana, taken as they often are from different angles and via different media. As Josyph stresses by quoting from Henry Miller's book about painting in watercolors, *The Waters Reglitterized*, "For, as you well know, you can look at things all your

life and not see them really. This 'seeing' is, in a way, a 'not seeing' if you follow me" (qtd. in Josyph, 265n1). Agree or disagree with him—I myself probably do roughly half of each—his views are at once interesting, entertaining, thought provoking, even formidable. As a metatheorist tagmemicist (you will have to look up tagmemics) by nature and some education, I incline strongly toward multiple perspectives in examining phenomena myself—and Josyph uniquely adds to that perspectival cause.

Beyond but as part of that, he makes certain to include numerous other voices in the book's stronger section, Part One. He includes a walk/conversation with another atypical McCarthy researcher and interpreter, retired University of Tennessee professor of psychology Wes Morgan, whose main work has involved historical and geographical tracings of McCarthy's Southern characters and places. He next adds a "talk" with fellow director Tom Cornford about directing McCarthy, principally but not limited to *The Sunset Limited*. He devotes almost eighty pages to reproducing an exchange of letters with Marty Priola, webmaster for the McCarthy Society, one essentially creating a dialectic primarily focused on *The Crossing* but also containing further in-depth discussion of *The Sunset Limited* and various other references.

Frequently, however, Josyph is inclined to wall off other content in or approaches to McCarthy's writing, particularly regular subjects of the novelist such as God, religion, and even heresies and heretics. Yet such elements have indeed been well established relative to McCarthy, both biographically and critically, as real presences in his life and writings, at least in terms of literary value. For instance, in the Wes Morgan walk/talk chapter, Josyph, albeit in a reaction, is completely dismissive of Dianne Luce's excellent scholarship focusing on Gnosticism in McCarthy's Southern works (and perhaps of Petra Mundik's work on it in his Westerns). Moved by the real-life destitution of Gene Harrogate's lodging "hole" under a Knoxville viaduct, he rants (and Morgan assents):

that's what all of these critics, these bullshitters, they just don't understand with their *gnosticism* [*sic*] and their. . . I was homeless . . . once . . . and I know what it's like . . . It's not *gnosticism* . . . they're just out of their minds . . . and he [McCarthy] found it, and he understood it, and he *nailed* it . . . and *that's* where the genius is, not for any of that other. (59)

Well, yes and no, no and yes. Certainly the social import of McCarthy's art is of *great* importance, and there is no doubt that it deserves far more attention. Yet this and a number of other instances in this book build up their own walls around a tiny, desolate space. Many—perhaps most—who engage directly in

McCarthy criticism of varied sorts have witnessed horrific living conditions and even engaged in some degrees of them ourselves. In such cases, Josyph slips into summary pronouncements that constitute either-or fallacies where instead both-ands exist. While many in the “critical camp” might be in agreement with his opposition to what he terms “the scientifying of criticism” (“agreement” only perhaps since he leaves the phrase undefined and sans example), Josyph like Hemingway regularly appears to have a sickle to grind with almost all (at the least almost all literary) critics and types—though he himself utilizes high-level reader response, biographical, intertextual, and other approaches himself. At such times (and others) he is dismissive and reductive.

Josyph as well is highly negative regarding McCarthy as a scriptwriter. Certainly for almost anyone who has read the novelist’s abortive and dreary mess “Whales and Men” and read or watched the godless-awful *The Counselor*, that is mostly if not completely a position well taken. In fact, many readers value *The Stonemason* and *The Sunset Limited* as fine literary works, though arguably best viewed as closet dramas for reading alone (especially in the first work’s case, something that perhaps *Sunset’s* subtitle *A Novel in Dramatic Form* may be McCarthy’s own nod toward). Again, to truly approach McCarthy without walls would seem of necessity to involve allowing and even encouraging walls other than just one’s own. In his correspondence with Priola, in fact, Josyph does reveal more flexibility as the letters go on, and in his pieces involving others he is often initially more in agreement with many or even most of their assessments. So he is no mere contrarian, though a contrarian of sorts he is, and that provides no small part of his appeal.

In the end, these (and other) blemishes and all, Josyph’s book offers a large amount of new material about McCarthy and his writings and will be of great service to future essayists exploring those subjects. It also reminds us of how diverse criticism can be. Above all, it provides readers with fresh takes on what can indeed prove at times an all too predictable word-picture in which a pre-conceived theoretically inclined thesis cherry picks all sorts of forced and even verifiably incorrect “support.”

DAVID N. CREMEAN is professor of English and humanities at Black Hills State University in Spearfish, South Dakota, and a past president (2009) of the Western Literature Association. He has published a number of essays concerned with McCarthy, as well as others on subjects ranging from Ernest Hemingway to Clint Eastwood.