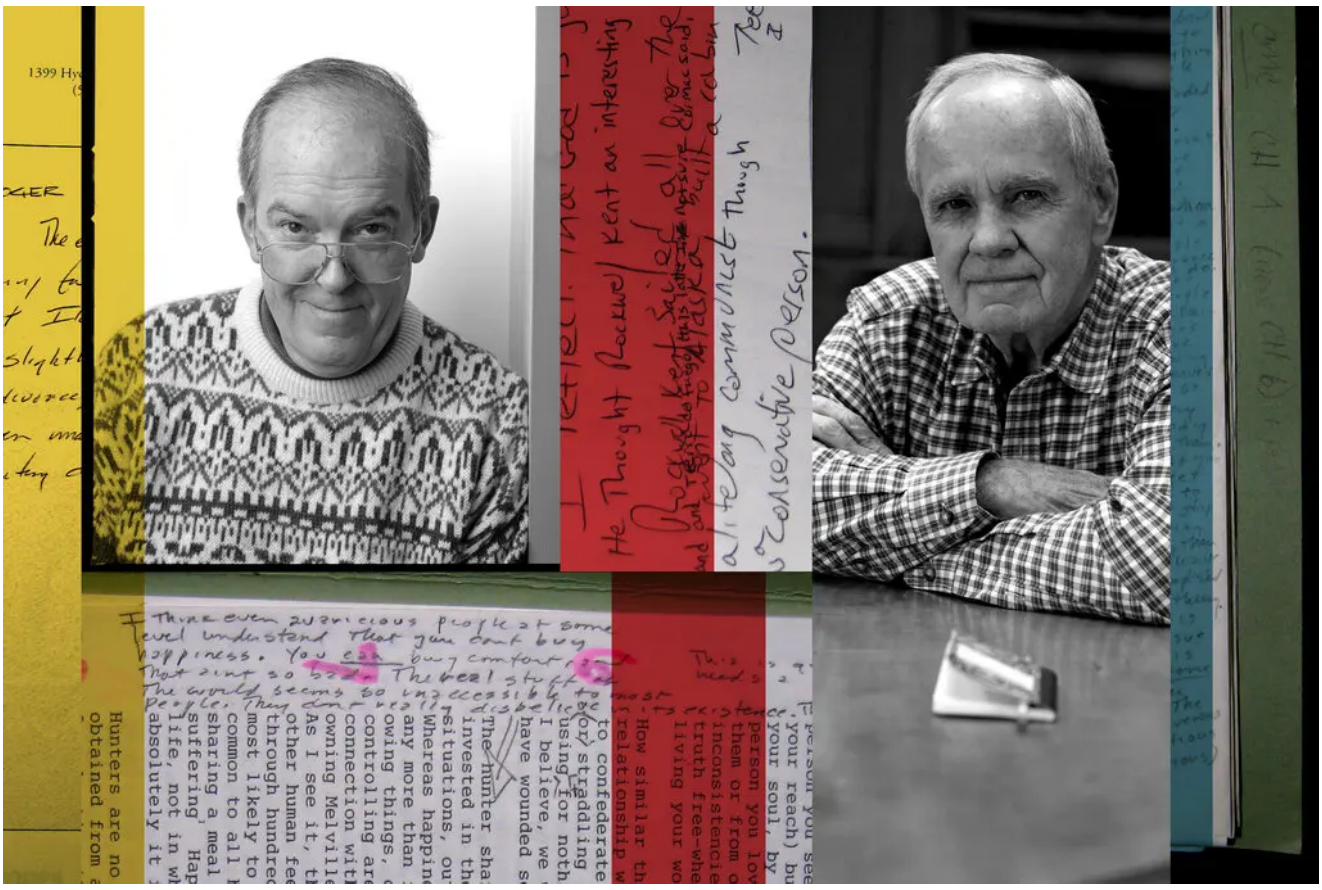
Cormac McCarthy Did Not Talk Craft, With One Surprising Exception

Notoriously reluctant to give advice, the author offered his views, and meticulous edits, to a lifelong friend: Roger Payne, the marine biologist who introduced the world to whale song.



An unlikely friendship between Roger Payne, left, and Cormac McCarthy became a decades-long creative collaboration. Photos by Adrian Arbib/Alamy (Payne); Shutterstock (McCarthy); Illustration by Matt Dorfman, via The New York Times

By Walker Mimms
June 15, 2024

By the time the marine biologist Roger Payne won the MacArthur genius grant in 1984, his fame was well-established: Credited with helping discover the song structure of humpback whales, he had popularized their mysterious groans and creaks with a series of field-recorded LPs that fueled the marine conservation movement.

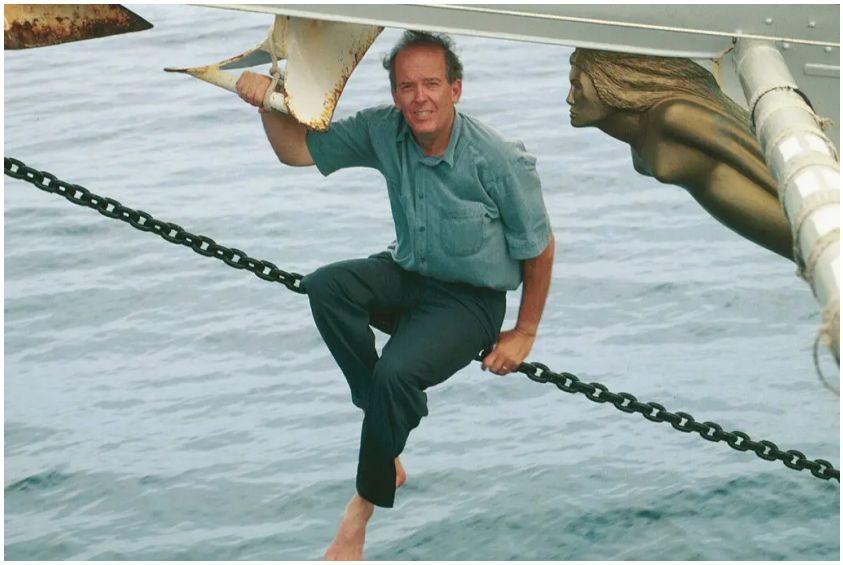
By the 1990s, as part of a pop-science turn that would deliver to millions of viewers an infectious sense of awe for sea mammals, Payne was giving interviews, directing an IMAX film and narrating television documentaries in a patrician New England accent that made clear "whale" is spelled with an "h."

He had also begun drafting a book. Part memoir, history and activism, "Among Whales" was designed to maximize concern for increasingly polluted oceans and reverence for their endangered giants. It was his first, and as he wrote, he sought editing help from a new friend, a writer he had met at a reunion for the MacArthur Fellowship: Cormac McCarthy.

McCarthy had won the inaugural MacArthur in 1981, when he was an obscure but revered writer at work on "Blood Meridian." After that, he said, he went to every MacArthur reunion. He studiously avoided other writers at these events, but when he met Payne, the two became "joined at the hip," Payne's widow, Lisa Harrow, recalled after his death. By 1986, they were traveling to Argentina to watch whales together.

Payne died on June 10, 2023, leaving boxes of uncataloged papers that document his combative, creative, decades-long friendship with McCarthy, who survived him by three days.

During his long career, McCarthy sat for very few interviews and kept notoriously silent about his creative process and his approach to craft. In early drafts of "Among Whales," which are among the documents left by Payne now being prepared for accession by a research institution, he revealed his views.



Payne's book "Among Whales" — which expresses concern for increasingly polluted oceans and reverence for their largest inhabitants — was published in 1995. Payne Estate

McCarthy unleashed a barrage of logic and discipline upon Payne's sentences, which were romantic, often moving, but also riddled with the detours, length and moralism of unchecked zeal.

"Simplify and de-spleen it," McCarthy barks in the margin.

"Ambiguous, but — oh joy — we can lose it and gain."

"IF the material is innately gripping — which this is — it is counterproductive to try to jazz it up or make it 'exciting.'"

"Think about exactly what occurred."

"This is poorly said. It has the sound of something spoken. Writing is different."

"If you assume a low level of intelligence in the reader you will be left precisely with that readership. Is that really what you want?"

"Rewrite: Clean Direct Simple Sharp Precise Brief."

"This is all pretty words."

"All this needs to be ordered. Beginning, middle, end. Narrative is all."

"Yeah, OK. Yawn."

"HOORAY! Real world stuff again."

"You are challenging the reader to come up with an exception. He will."

"Totally indecipherable."

"Jesus, Roger."

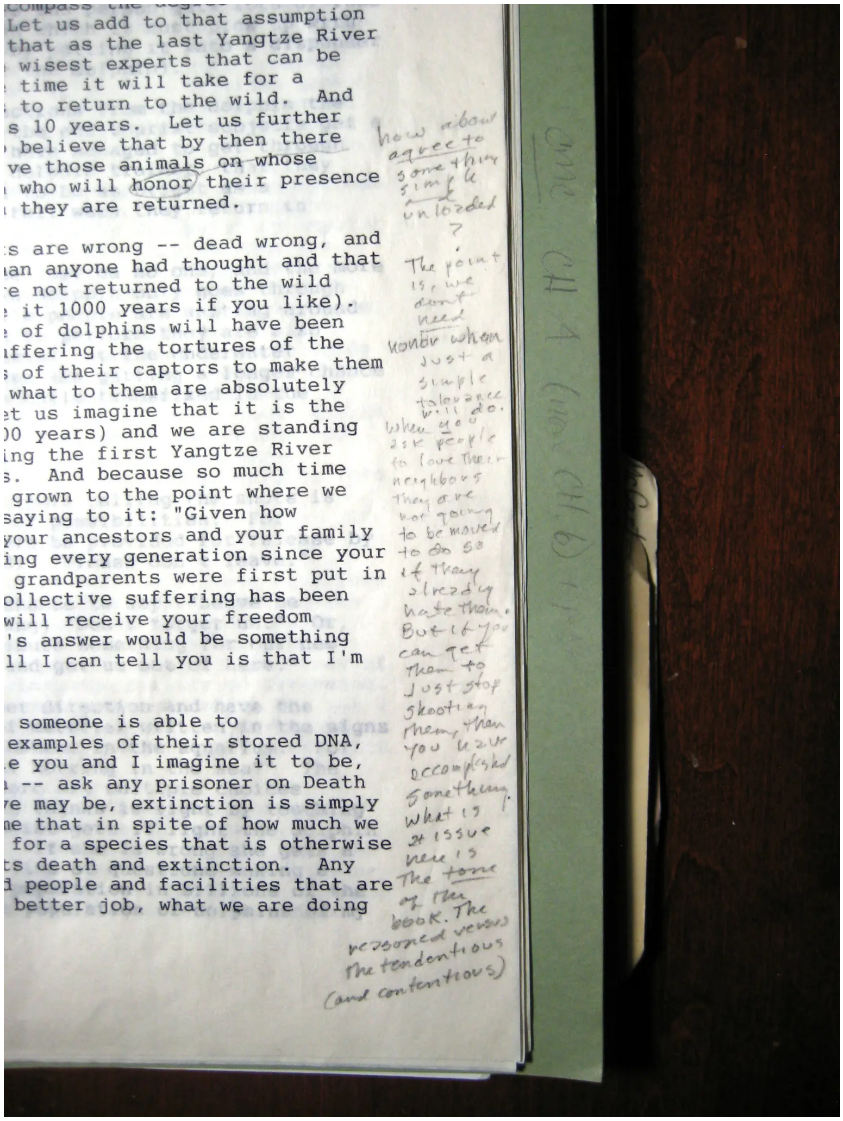
“NOPE.”

The book proved Payne’s last.

Though harsh, McCarthy could also encourage. “Roger: I read this in tears,” he says of Payne’s particularly beautiful account of Patagonia — Chapter 2 in the book. He signed his work with “Much love. C.”

McCarthy’s own novels were unsparing and frequently violent, cast in prose as austere and unforgiving as the landscapes they inhabited. His sentences were often shorn of punctuation and quotation marks. And he sought precise terms, even esoteric ones like “riprap” and “animalcule” that could rival technical manuals for specificity. As an editor, too, McCarthy worked in sharp, minute pencil columns with a fluency in proofreader marks that pulled his friend’s objectives to the fore.

“I was taking the most excruciating care with forming each letter for maximum legibility,” he assured Payne by phone in 1993.



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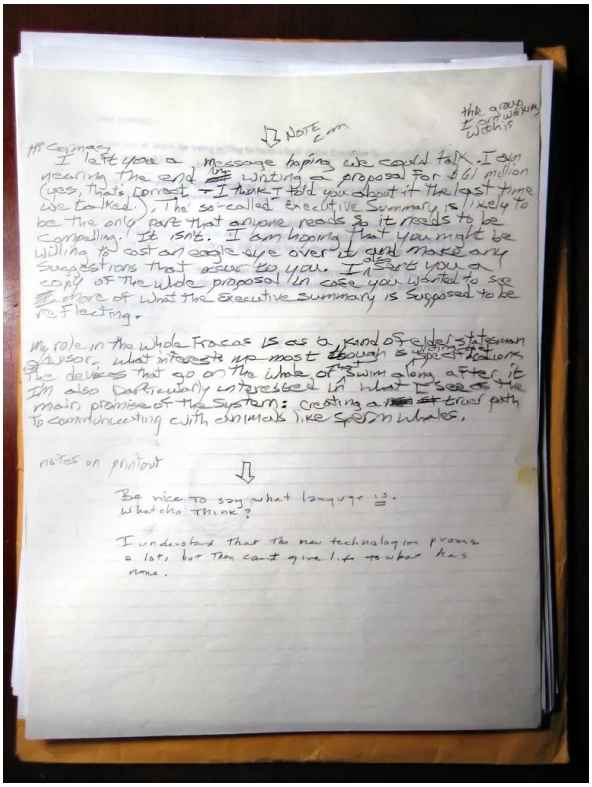
From 1992 to 1993, Payne scrawled McCarthy's rules with the haste of a student at lecture, then typed these notes into his computer. In one, McCarthy quotes Rudyard Kipling — "Something hidden. Go and find it" — and suggests Payne "hold back on certain information which is finally revealed in the end." In another: "If you have a thesis it is better to have the reader discover it for himself."

When Payne found revision taxing, McCarthy took the long view: "You must be prepared to put in the time and effort that it takes to produce a good book," he replied, "because it will be around long after the reasons that there was no time for finishing it properly have been forgotten."

Principle — not just clarity — was often at stake. When Payne sermonizes that "there are a whole variety of ecosystems including

noxious smelling swamps as well as brutally arid deserts that we must respect as having rights equal to our own," McCarthy laughs him off. "Blue whales didn't survive by respecting the rights of krill," he writes. "They ate 'em. And the rights of swamps? This is bonkers."

The debate turned to language. "I think the trouble with this is it seems to assume that dolphins could talk," McCarthy advises when Payne likens those mammals' behavior to human instruction: "Maybe you could point out that they're not talking."



McCarthy and Payne exchanged edits, notes and even brief letters. Payne Foundation

Discussions of animal aptitude brought out their views of humanity. When Payne, then living in London, complained in a draft that Britons never learned to "share their problems," McCarthy warned in the margin that "I sympathize with your impatience at their austerity, but also sympathize with Waugh's celebration of intimacy and horror of familiarity."

By press time, in 1995, Payne had cut the swamp line, the Anglophobia and much else, per McCarthy. And though he dedicated the book to his friend in "admiration for his genius," Payne absorbed without attribution many of McCarthy's comments, even whole paragraphs.

The give and take went both ways. In his archive, Payne kept an

undated typescript of McCarthy's screenplay of "Whales and Men." McCarthy had mentioned a "whale story" as early as 1986, but the screenplay's textual resonances suggest that he was still drafting it while marking Payne's manuscript, in 1992 and 1993. Texas State University also holds a copy. It was never produced.

The most optimistic of McCarthy's works, "Whales and Men" is a dramedy of Anglo-American manners set in coastal Florida hotels, in an 18th-century Irish manor home and aboard various ocean crafts during 1983 and 1984.

In it, the marine biologist Guy studies whales despite gloomily — and unlike Payne — accepting their extinction. Accompanying him are the likable Irish aristocrat Peter and the disillusioned American doctor John Western, who is in some ways a prototype for Bobby Western, the charismatic loner of McCarthy's final novels. Joined by John's girlfriend, Kelly, they ponder communication and consciousness among whales, animal mysteries that heighten the unspoken human longings on board.

Peter has a photographic memory for the poets Ezra Pound and Dylan Thomas but also — thanks to childhood trauma — a distaste for language. Words displace their real-life referents, he tells Guy: "I began to see all symbolic enterprise as alienation. Every monument a false idol."

Whales, by contrast, show no problem communicating immediate experience, Guy explains. Water conducts sound better than air, allowing whale pods to form "a living web" spanning many miles, John adds, with a wonder reminiscent of Payne.

Sperm whales' brains, moreover, are "seven times the size" of ours, Guy marvels, suggesting a profound intelligence we have yet to discover. Perhaps they "contemplate the universe," he offers. "I know that sounds absurd. But is it? Do we know?"

Unfathomed intellect was a Payne talking point. What might those brains contain? McCarthy plumbed it too, with the unconscious drives of his heroes Cornelius Suttree and Alicia Western, with his 2017 essay "The Kekulé Problem" and with horses and wolves in his blockbuster Border Trilogy of the 1990s. As McCarthy told Payne over the phone in 1989, while drafting "All the Pretty Horses": "Language is not an indicator of intell but our only way of thinking."

McCarthy died on June 13, 2023 — just three days after Payne passed away. Walker Mimms

As they aged in the 2000s, Payne continued transcribing their phone calls. Conversation ranged over articles in the New York Review of Books, McCarthy's new fame and fatherhood, Herman Melville, W.G. Sebald, Carl Sagan, "our prostate states," the race politics freighting McCarthy's play "The Stonemason" and marmalade McCarthy requested from London (Seville orange, extra peel). Of his concussion in a Texas lumber yard, which left him bleeding, McCarthy told Payne he informed the frightened bystanders, "I have no time to wait for an El Paso ambulance — we'd all be dead," then "just pulled a towel around my head, twisted it tight and drove myself to the hospital."

By 2019, McCarthy, 86, had moved on to mathematics and physics, and was finishing his last act, his companion novels "The Passenger" and "Stella Maris," while Payne, 84, was helping to launch a project that attempts communication with whales using artificial intelligence.

Last month, the initiative, called Project CETI (Cetacean Translation Initiative), announced the discovery of a whole repertoire of clicks and trills used among sperm whales.

But before its founding in 2020, Payne asked McCarthy for edits on Project CETI's grant proposal. "The reason humanity finds itself in the present crisis is because we have always put the needs of humans before the needs of the rest of life," read the short call to action. "It is our universal blindness — our fatal flaw."

"It's also how we came to dominance," McCarthy shot back in a note Payne preserved. "Roger, I think I just don't buy any of this.

We are where we are because of symbolic language. Over. Out. Stop. Period. End of Story." His whale screenplay concluded, after all, with a string of deeply felt communions through human language: a poem, a letter, a speech in Parliament.

McCarthy's criticism notwithstanding, in the days before their deaths Payne published a version of the manifesto in Time magazine — the final salvo of a life of tireless animal advocacy.

Only this time Payne softened his ire with a prepositional phrase: " … in major part because we have always put the needs of humans before the needs of the rest of life." It was Payne's last concession to his tough-love friend, and it was McCarthy's final edit.

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