**Jean Chretien  
Mrs. Doubtfire, Class 2B**

*Blood Meridian*

**Author: Cormac McCarthy  
Type of book: with pages**

## Introduction

*Blood Meridian* or *the Evening Redness in the West* is a 1985 epic Western (or anti-Western)[1][2] novel by American author Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy's fifth book, it was published by Random House.

## Author

McCarthy wrote Blood Meridian while living on the money from his 1981 MacArthur Fellows grant. It is his first novel set in the Southwestern United States, a change from the Appalachian settings of his earlier work.

## Main characters

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| --- | --- |
| Character One | Describe this character. |
| **Character Two** | Describe this character. |
| Character Three | Describe this character. |
| Character Four | Describe this character. |

## Story

The novel follows an adolescent runaway from Tennessee with a predilection for violence, known only as "the kid," who is introduced as being born during the famous Leonids meteor shower of 1833. In the late 1840s, he first encounters an enormous and completely hairless character, Judge Holden, at a religious revival in Nacogdoches, Texas. There, Holden shows his dark nature by falsely accusing a preacher of raping both a young girl and a goat, inciting those attending the revival to physically attack the preacher.

The kid carries on journeying alone on his mule through the plains of eastern Texas, and he spends a night in the shelter of a recluse before arriving in "Bexar" (the county that includes modern-day San Antonio). After a violent encounter with a bartender which establishes the kid as a formidable fighter, he joins a party of ill-armed United States Army irregulars, led by a Captain White, on a filibustering mission to claim Mexican land for the United States. Shortly after entering Mexico, they are attacked, and many killed, by a band of Comanche warriors. Arrested in Chihuahua, the kid is set free when his cell neighbor and prior acquaintance from Texas, the earless Louis Toadvine, tells the authorities that the two of them would make useful recruits for the state's newly hired scalp hunting operation, led by John Joel Glanton.

Toadvine and the kid consequently join Glanton's gang. The bulk of the novel details the gang's conversations and depraved, murderous activities as they travel on horseback throughout the borderlands. The gang encounters a traveling carnival, and, in untranslated Spanish, each of their fortunes is told with Tarot cards. The gang originally contracts with various regional leaders to exterminate Apaches and are given a bounty for each scalp they recover. Before long, however, they murder almost anything in their path, including peaceful agrarian Indians, unprotected Mexican villagers, and even Mexican and American soldiers.

Judge Holden, who re-enters the story as a fellow scalp hunter in the Glanton gang, is presented as a profoundly mysterious and awe-inspiring figure; the others seem to regard him as not quite human. Despite his refined manner and remarkable intellect, the judge often proves to be among the most ruthless and bloodthirsty members of the gang, and is[6] strongly implied to prey on children during their travels. According to an ex-priest gang member named Ben Tobin, the Glanton gang first met the judge while fleeing from the onslaught of a much larger group of Apaches. In the middle of the desert, the gang found Holden sitting on an enormous boulder, where he seemed to be waiting for them all. He took them to an extinct volcano, and improvised gunpowder from natural materials, enough to give them the advantage against their Apache pursuers. When the kid remembers seeing Holden in Nacogdoches, Tobin explains that each man in the gang claims to have met the judge at some point before joining Glanton's gang.

After months of marauding, the gang crosses into the Mexican Cession, where they set up a systematic and brutal robbery operation at a ferry on the Colorado River near Yuma, Arizona. Local Yuma (Quechan) Indians are approached to help the gang wrest control of the ferry from its original owner, but Glanton's gang betrays the natives, using their presence and previously coordinated attack on the ferry as an excuse to seize the ferry's munitions and slaughter the Yuma. Because of the new operators' brutal ways, a group of US Army soldiers sets up a second ferry at a ford upriver to cross—which the Yuma briefly appropriate until their ferryman is decapitated and thrown in the river. Eventually, after the gang had amassed a large fortune through robbing settlers using the ferry, the Yumas suddenly attack the gang and kill most of them including Glanton, though Holden (after fighting off the Yumas using his immense strength to level a howitzer by hand) survives and escapes.

The kid, Toadvine, and Tobin are among the few other survivors who escape into the desert, although the kid takes an arrow in the leg. Heading west together, the kid and Tobin encounter a weaponless and hatless Judge Holden and his accompanying imbecile arriving at a watering-hole. The judge negotiates successfully for Tobin's hat and unsuccessfully for the kid's pistol, and invites them to share in the 'common' water. The kid and Tobin leave the watering hole and move on through the desert. The next evening at another watering sight, they have a surprise-attack shoot-out with the judge, who fires a non-fatal shot to Tobin's neck. The kid shoots the two horses the judge came with. As Tobin and the kid hide among bones near the desert creek, the judge delivers a speech about property rights (regarding the shot horses) and advises the kid to reveal himself. Ignoring this, Tobin and the kid continue their travels, both wounded and much weakened. The judge is following the trail and them, a few miles behind. The next day they slightly side-track off the trail and hide, hoping to let the judge pass them bye and lose their trail. The judge does repeatedly pass by them, quite near and initially unaware; and soon addresses them aloud, knowing they are nearby and hiding. Although the kid has had three easy clear-shot opportunities to shoot the judge as Tobin strongly advises, he doesn't take the shots. The judge and the imbecile then leave. Tobin and the kid are in quite bad shape and would likely have died out in the desert, but some benevolent indians rescue them and they survive.

Both parties end up in San Diego, but the kid gets separated from Tobin when he is caught by local authorities and imprisoned. Holden visits him in jail, stating that he told the jailers "the truth": that the kid alone was responsible for the end of the Glanton gang. The kid declares that the judge was responsible for the gang's evils, but the judge denies it. After reaching through the cell bars to try to touch the kid, Holden leaves the kid alone, stating that he "has errands." The kid is released and seeks a doctor to treat his wound. Under the influence of medicinal ether, he hallucinates that the judge is visiting him, along with a curious man who forges coins. The kid recovers and seeks out Tobin, with no luck. He makes his way to Los Angeles, where he witnesses the executions of Toadvine and David Brown—leaving now only Tobin (assuming he is alive), the judge, and the kid.

The kid again wanders across the American West, and decades are compressed into a few pages. In 1878, he makes his way to Fort Griffin, Texas and is now referred to by the author as "the man." The lawless city is a center for processing the remains of the American bison, which have been hunted nearly to extinction. At a saloon, the man yet again meets the judge, who does not seem to have aged in the intervening years. Holden calls the man "the last of the true," and the pair talk on equal terms. Holden describes the man as a disappointment, stating that the man held in his heart "clemency for the heathen." Holden declares prophetically that the man has arrived at the saloon for the dance. The man tells the judge, "You aint nothin" and, noting the newly dead trained dancing-bear just gratuitously-shot at the saloon, says that "even a dumb animal can dance."

The man hires a prostitute, then afterward goes to an outhouse under another meteor shower. In the outhouse, he is surprised by the naked judge there waiting for him, who "gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh." This is the last mention of the man. In the next scene, two men from the saloon approach the outhouse, open the door, and gaze in awed horror at what they see, stating only, "Good God almighty." The last paragraph finds the judge back in the saloon, dancing in the nude and playing fiddle wildly among the drunkards and prostitutes, with the narrator stating the judge's repeated claims that he never sleeps and will never die.

A brief epilogue features an unspecified person augering a row of holes across the prairie. The worker sparks a fire in each of the holes while an assortment of passionless wanderers crosses the row. The line of holes is described as "a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie."

## Themes

## Violence

## A major theme is the warlike nature of man. Critic Harold Bloom[8] praised Blood Meridian as one of the best 20th century American novels, describing it as "worthy of Herman Melville's Moby-Dick,"[9] but admitted that he found the book's pervasive violence so shocking that he had several false starts before reading the book entirely. Caryn James argued that the novel's violence was a "slap in the face" to modern readers cut off from the brutality of life, while Terrence Morgan thought that, though initially shocking, the effect of the violence gradually waned until the reader was bored.[10] Billy J. Stratton contends that the brutality depicted is the primary mechanism through which McCarthy challenges binaries and promotes his revisionist agenda.[11] Lilley argues that many critics struggle with the fact that McCarthy does not use violence for "jury-rigged, symbolic plot resolutions . . . In McCarthy's work, violence tends to be just that; it is not a sign or symbol of something else."[12]

## Epigraphs and ending[edit]

## Three epigraphs open the book: quotations from French writer Paul Valéry, from German Christian mystic Jacob Boehme, and a 1982 news clipping from the Yuma Sun reporting the claim of members of an Ethiopian archeological excavation that a fossilized skull three hundred millennia old seemed to have been scalped. The themes implied by the epigraphs have been variously discussed without specific conclusions.

## As noted above concerning the ending, the most common interpretation of the novel is that Holden kills the kid in a Fort Griffin, Texas, outhouse. The fact that the kid's death is not depicted might be significant. Blood Meridian is a catalog of brutality, depicting, in sometimes explicit detail, all manner of violence, bloodshed, brutality and cruelty. For the dramatic climax to be left undepicted leaves something of a vacuum for the reader: knowing full well the horrors established in the past hundreds of pages, the kid's unstated fate might still be too awful to describe, and too much for the mind to fathom: the sight of the kid's fate leaves several witnesses stunned almost to silence; never in the book does any other character have this response to violence, again underlining the singularity of the kid's fate.

## Patrick W. Shaw argues that Holden has sexually violated the protagonist. As Shaw writes, the novel had several times earlier established "a sequence of events that gives us ample information to visualize how Holden molests a child, then silences him with aggression."[13] According to Shaw's argument, Holden's actions in the Fort Griffin outhouse are the culmination of what he desired decades earlier: to rape the kid, then perhaps kill him to silence the only survivor of the Glanton gang. If the judge wanted only to kill the kid, there would be no need for him to undress as he waited in the outhouse. Shaw writes,

## When the judge assaults the kid in the Fort Griffin jakes… he betrays a complex of psychological, historical and sexual values of which the kid has no conscious awareness, but which are distinctly conveyed to the reader. Ultimately, it is the kid's personal humiliation which impacts the reader most tellingly. In the virile warrior culture which dominates that text and to which the reader has become acclimated, seduction into public homoeroticism is a dreadful fate. We do not see behind the outhouse door to know the details of the kid's corruption. It may be as simple as the embrace that we do witness or as violent as the sodomy implied by the judge's killing of the Indian children. The kid's powerful survival instinct perhaps suggests that he is a more willing participant than a victim. However, the degree of debasement and the extent of the kid's willingness are incidental. The public revelation of the act is what matters. Other men have observed the kid's humiliation… In such a male culture, public homoeroticism is untenable and it is this sudden revelation that horrifies the observers at Fort Griffin. No other act could offend their masculine sensibilities as the shock they display… This triumph over the kid is what the exhibitionist and homoerotic judge celebrates by dancing naked atop the wall, just as he did after assaulting the half-breed boy.

## — Patrick W. Shaw, "The Kid's Fate, the Judge's Guilt"[14]

## Yet Shaw’s effort to penetrate the mystery in the jakes has not managed to satisfy other critics, who have rejected his thesis as more sensational than textual:

## Patrick W. Shaw's articlereviews the controversy over the end of McCarthy's masterpiece: does the judge kill the kid in the 'jakes' or does he merely sexually assault him? Shaw then goes on to review Eric Fromm's distinction between benign and malignant aggression – benign aggression being only used for survival and is rooted in human instinct, whereas malignant aggression is destructive and is based in human character. It is Shaw's thesis that McCarthy fully accepts and exemplifies Fromm's malignant aggression, which he sees as part of the human condition, and which we do well to heed, for without this acceptation we risk losing ourselves in intellectual and physical servitude. Shaw goes in for a certain amount of special pleading: the Comanches sodomizing their dying victims; the kid's exceptional aggression and ability, so that the judge could not have killed him that easily; the judge deriving more satisfaction from tormenting than from eliminating. Since the judge considers the kid has reserved some clemency in his soul, Shaw argues, that the only logical step is that the judge humiliates him by sodomy. This is possible, but unlikely. The judge gives one the impression, not so much of male potency, but of impotence. His mountainous, hairless flesh is more that of a eunuch than a man. Having suggested paedophilia, Shaw then goes back to read other episodes in terms of the judge's paedophilia: the hypothesis thus becomes the premise. And in so arguing, Shaw falls into the same trap of narrative closure for which he has been berating other critics. The point about Blood Meridian is that we do not know and we cannot know.

## — Peter J. Kitson (Ed.), "The Year's Work in English Studies Volume 78 (1997)"[15]

## Gnosticism[edit]

## Various discussions by Leo Daugherty, Barclay Owens, Harold Bloom and others, have resulted from the second epigraph of the three which are used by the author to introduce the novel taken from the "Gnostic" mystic Jacob Boehme. The quote from Boehme reads as follows: "It is not to be thought that the life of darkness is sunk in misery and lost as if in sorrowing. There is no sorrowing. For sorrow is a thing that is swallowed up in death, and death and dying are the very life of the darkness." No specific conclusions have been reached concerning its interpretation and the extent of its direct or indirect relevance to the novel.

## These critics agree that there are Gnostic elements present in Blood Meridian, but they disagree on the precise meaning and implication of those elements. One of the most detailed of these arguments is made by Leo Daugherty in his 1992 article, "Blood Meridian as Gnostic Tragedy." Daugherty argues "Gnostic thought is central to Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian" (Daugherty, 122); specifically, the Persian-Zoroastrian-Manichean branch of Gnosticism. He describes the novel as a "rare coupling of Gnostic 'ideology' with the 'affect' of Hellenic tragedy by means of depicting how power works in the making and erasing of culture, and of what the human condition amounts to when a person opposes that power and thence gets introduced to fate."[16]

## Daugherty sees Holden as an archon, and the kid as a "failed pneuma." The novel's narrator explicitly states that the kid feels a "spark of the alien divine". Furthermore, the kid rarely initiates violence, usually doing so only when urged by others or in self-defense. Holden, however, speaks of his desire to dominate the earth and all who dwell on it, by any means: from outright violence to deception and trickery. He expresses his wish to become a "suzerain," one who "rules even when there are other rulers" and whose power overrides all others'. In 2009, Bloom did refer to Boehme in the context of Blood Meridian as, "a very specific type of Kabbalistic Gnostic".

## Daugherty contends that the staggering violence of the novel can best be understood through a Gnostic lens. "Evil" as defined by the Gnostics was a far larger, more pervasive presence in human life than the rather tame and "domesticated" Satan of Christianity. As Daugherty writes, "For [Gnostics], evil was simply everything that is, with the exception of bits of spirit imprisoned here. And what they saw is what we see in the world of Blood Meridian."[17] Barcley Owens argues that, while there are undoubtedly Gnostic qualities to the novel, Daugherty's arguments are "ultimately unsuccessful,"[18] because Daugherty fails to address the novel's pervasive violence adequately and because he overstates the kid's goodness.

## Theodicy[edit]

## Another major theme concerning Blood Meridian involves the subject of theodicy. Theodicy in general refers to the issue of the philosophical or theological attempt to justify the existence of that which is metaphysically or philosophically good in a world which contains so much apparent and manifest evil. Douglas Canfield in his essay "Theodicy in Blood Meridian" (in his book Mavericks on the Border, 2001, Lexington University Press)[citation needed] asserts that theodicy is the central theme of Blood Meridian. James Wood in his essay for The New Yorker entitled "Red Planet" from 2005 took a similar position to this in recognizing the issue of the general justification of metaphysical goodness in the presence of evil in the world as a recurrent theme in the novel.[citation needed] This was directly supported by Edwin Turner on 28 September 2010 in his essay on Blood Meridian for Biblioklept.[citation needed] Chris Dacus in the Cormac McCarthy Journal for 2009 wrote the essay entitled, "The West as Symbol of the Eschaton in Cormac McCarthy," where he expressed his preference for discussing the theme of theodicy in its eschatological terms in comparison to the theological scene of the last judgment.[citation needed] This preference for reading theodicy as an eschatological theme was further affirmed by Harold Bloom in his recurrent phrase of referring to the novel as "The Authentic Apocalyptic Novel."[citation needed]

## Evaluation

It was good

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