“Books are made out of books,” said Cormac McCarthy in 1992 (Woodward). Call it something like Ishmael, Huckleberry Finn, or Sal Paradise on horseback; *All the Pretty Horses* uses travel, distance, and disorientation as narrative modes. The novel also has intriguing parallels to the life story of an important secondary figure in twentieth-century literature, Arnold Samuelson.¹ Samuelson visited Ernest Hemingway in Key West in 1934-5 and became the subject of an *Esquire* article—“Monologue to the Maestro”—in which Hemingway describes the arrival of the young Midwesterner to his home and their conversations about writing and literature. By the late 1940s Samuelson had settled just north of San Angelo in Robert Lee, Texas, where he worked as a ranch-hand and did other odd jobs. Samuelson continued writing and published a short story, “Mexico for Tramps,” about a downtrodden American’s travels in Mexico. Samuelson’s wife left him and lit out for California, and late in life he was involved in an infamous courtroom drama about the proprietorship of a horse. After an examination of Samuelson’s life, this article looks into some of the uncanny similarities that *All the Pretty Horses* has with the Maestro’s life after he left Key West.
Cormac McCarthy’s literary allusions to Hemingway have been the subject of a significant amount of criticism. Allan Bilton contends that McCarthy had a “formal debt” to Hemingway (quoted in Hage 49-5) and Peter Josyph said that “in All the Pretty Horses, McCarthy is Hemingway: he is what Hemingway would have been had he lived to be Cormac McCarthy” (63). In a comprehensive treatise on the topic titled “A Bell That Tolled and Ceased Where No Bell Was: Hemingway and All the Pretty Horses,” James Cutchins maps McCarthy’s novel through the lens of its veiled references to For Whom the Bell Tolls. In the film version of The Road, the town of Hemingway, South Carolina appears conspicuously on the map that the man and boy review at a roadside (Herlihy-Mera 88). (While the actual town is about thirty miles inland, in the film it appears on the Atlantic coast.) In the vast body of scholarly literature on All the Pretty Horses, nonetheless, the narrative’s apparent connections to Hemingway’s friend and boatmate, Arnold Samuelson, have yet to be explored.

Arnold Samuelson was born in 1912 in White Earth, North Dakota to Norwegian immigrants. After being expelled from the local high school for pranks, he went on to be valedictorian of nearby Tioga High School and later matriculated at University of Minnesota. While Samuelson would make several adventurous trips around America, Mexico, and the Caribbean, his personal life was colored by horrific tragedy. In 1931 he was nineteen years old and studying in Minneapolis. Samuelson’s 24-year-old sister, Hedvig, lived in Phoenix where she eeked out a living as a physician’s assistant. Following a spat over the doctor’s affections, a woman Winnie Ruth Judd shot Arnold’s sister and another woman at close range. Judd dismembered the Hedvig’s body and put it in a trunk. She took the grisly baggage on the Golden State Limited Line to Los Angeles, where station porters investigated the smell emanating from her things. They imagined that there was a dead deer inside; by the time they saw the body, Judd had fled into the
street. Her baggage was tracked to an address in Los Angeles where she was later arrested. In a trial that made headlines around the country, Judd was convicted of “The Trunk Murders” and sentenced to hang. She was ultimately committed to a mental institution.

Samuelson was working as an assistant the *Minneapolis Tribune* as the stories about his sister’s murder came across the wires. The young man left school for a period. His parents were never the same. The next few years of Samuelson’s life were whimsical in their intent and gloomy in their affect. Eight months after the homicide, Samuelson and his friend Kenneth Schmidt spent a winter traveling down through Texas, over to California, and up to the Pacific Northwest. The two rode the Golden State Limited (on the same tracks as did his sister’s body) to Los Angeles, tried and failed to get on a steamer out of the port, and then hitchhiked to San Francisco. They offered haircuts to railroad workers for petty cash. The duo pondered heading into Mexico and stopped at the Mexican governmental outpost in San Francisco to discuss the matter:

This morning we had a lengthy talk with a Mexican consul. He disacknowledged the possibility of entering the country without permission of immigration authorities. Even if we evaded border officials, he said, our mode of travel could be only by trains, and that would evoke suspicion and lead to our arrest and conviction. Mexico, he explained, is retaliating against the United States deportation. (Samuelson, “Wandering Universe Reach a Heaven”)

Their letters home were serialized in the *Minneapolis Tribune*. Eventually the two made their way back to Minneapolis where Samuelsson finished his university coursework.

**Hemingway and the Maestro, 1934**
In early 1934 Samuelson cut out a picture of Hemingway that had appeared in the *Tribune*, put it in his pocket, and headed south. After a long journey of thumbing and sleeping on floors, he arrived on the small island and fell asleep in a public park. He was awakened in the middle of the night by a cop, who took him to jail for the night. After a good night’s sleep, a meal, and scores of insect bites, the young man from North Dakota walked up to Hemingway’s home on Whitehead Street and knocked on the door. “He was a big man, tall, narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered, and he stood with his feet set apart,” Samuelson remembers in his memoir, *With Hemingway*. “I had nothing to say. I couldn’t remember a word of my prepared speech” (qtd. in Hendrickson 143). Hemingway was on his way into town to get the mail and gave Arnold a ride. “He left me with that damned wonderful feeling you can have only once in a lifetime if you are a young man who wants to become a writer and you have just met the man you admire as the greatest writer alive” (qtd. in Hendrickson 144).

Hemingway was “both flattered and appalled” that someone came from Minnesota to ask him a few questions. He described Samuelson as a man who “had worked as a newspaperman, a rough carpenter, a harvest hand, a day laborer, and had bummed his way across America twice” (*By-Line* 213). Hemingway offered him a job working on his new boat, *Pilar*, which was to be shipped south from the New York to Miami in the coming days. Samuelson could sleep on the boat as long as he kept the decks clean and the log up to date. He would also accompany Hemingway fishing for marlin out on the Gulf Stream. Hemingway dubbed Samuelson “The Maestro,” later shortened to “Mice,” because he played the violin. Mice quickly became a fixture around the boat and the Hemingway home. In “Monologue to the Maestro,” Hemingway says that he’s “going to be one hell of a good writer because you certain aren’t worth a damn at anything
else” (Byline 214). While Hemingway would rib him in print, he seemed to have a genuine affection for Samuelson.

The end of the Maestro’s days on Key West came rather unexpectedly (Herlihy). In early February of 1935 he suddenly headed back to Minnesota. It must have seemed strange to have an employee and friend abruptly quit a place like the Florida Keys for Minnesota in the middle of winter—after all, Hemingway had just invited him to crew on a trip to Bimini the following summer. Eight months later Hemingway would receive a letter that made clear the impetus Samuelson had to get out of town: he had impregnated a teenage girl during a one-night stand on the Pilar. He said, “I felt damned sorry for the girl and gave her my name and told her that my mail would be forwarded….She wasn’t after money or a husband, and she didn’t seem to be worried” (qtd. in Hendrickson 178). The letter said that Samuelson hadn’t heard from her since he left Florida. Samuelson had spent a few months in Minnesota, Iowa and the Dakotas, and traveled across the country two more times. In the fall of 1935 he headed for Mexico, where he would play violin on a radio station and compile experience for a short story called “Mexico for Tramps.” Esquire bought the piece (possibly on Hemingway’s advice) and it appeared in November 1937.

Samuelson would continue to write throughout his life, though he never found success. “My problem is that I have a year of Ernest Hemingway’s life locked up in my head” (qtd. in Hendrickson 165). His soul-searching went on until he settled in Robert Lee. Before that, he had built a sod lodge in North Dakota, gotten married and gone to Alaska for a time (as did McCarthy). Eventually he took a job breaking “wild broncos” as he described it, in Texas (With Hemingway x). Samuelson and his wife, Vivian Stettler, built a small home in the Mexican section of Robert Lee, the seat of one of the least-populated counties in the U.S.
In 1956 his fourteen-year-old horse was impounded. Samuelson felt that the horse, named Bozo, was not being fed or watered appropriately; he thought it within his moral rights to take it back from the county. The event resulted in a bizarre courtroom spectacle over the proprietorship of the animal, not unlike the drama that plays out in Ozona in *All the Pretty Horses*. As Paul Hendrickson notes, “About one hundred spectators crowded into city hall for the comic horse-opera trial” (160). “I am appearing,” said Samuelson as he emerged in the courtroom, “on behalf of the defendant and not as the defendant” (qtd. in Hendrickson 160). He was found guilty and fined $100.

His wife would eventually leave him and move to California, and Samuelson’s final days were spent in desperate isolation. Joan Davis, Justice of the Peace in Robert Lee, said that Samuelson’s demons were from visions that he saw in his mind:

> I go to a lot of deaths here. They can’t move the body till I get there. I can’t imagine the effect of something like that trunk murder on him when he was so young. Your own sister chopped into pieces. Even if you never saw it, you saw it in your mind. (qtd. in Hendrickson 162-3)

Arnold died at his home in 1981 just after returning from San Angelo on his motorcycle.

Beyond the apparent allusions to the life of Hemingway’s Maestro in *All the Pretty Horses*, some key moments in the novel occur contemporaneously with one of Hemingway’s most famous works, *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago’s struggle with the marlin occurs from September 12-16, 1950 (Hurley 77-80)—and in *All the Pretty Horses* on September 15, 1950, John Grady sees Alejandra for the last time. The two lovers spend the night of the 14th together at a hotel in Zacatecas, and the next day he watches a train pull out of the station with Alejandra on it. Cole spends the night of September 15 alone in the city, gets into a fight, and loses his belongings. He
quits town on September 16 with a new skeleton in his closet on the same day that Santiago returns to Cojímar with the skeleton of the great marlin (*All the Pretty Horses* 249; Bell 8).  

In addition to the uncanny resemblances between Samuelson’s life and the events of *All the Pretty Horses*, the only piece of fiction he published, “Mexico for Tramps,” concerns an American who travels around Mexico, looking for a place to live. The protagonist would like to be able to talk with the people there as “Mexican to Mexican, not as an American tourist to native” (94). (He would likely envy John Grady in that capacity.) Samuelson’s main character, though, is also conscious that his foreignness in Mexico is a boon for his experience there: “As an Americano I could mingle with all classes without being barred from any” (181). Out of money and without many options, he returns north. The story ends with a reflection that many Americans, including Hemingway, have made after trips abroad: “I never knew what boredom was until I went back to the United States” (181).

In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady and his father ride from on horseback from San Angelo to Robert Lee, where they have lunch. The elder Cole has several acquaintances there, who greet him as they enter the café. (Robert Lee could be his hometown or place of residence before the war, though those matters are left unclear.) During the visit to Samuelson’s adopted hometown, the elder Cole explains to his son John Grady that his mother, like Samuelson’s wife, left him and moved to California. After her abandonment, Cole’s father, like the Maestro, lives on in helpless isolation.

Whether McCarthy’s visit to Robert Lee when he was writing *All the Pretty Horses* brought him into the story of Arnold Samuelson’s biography is unclear, but it appears that the germ of the 1992 novel could well be that of Hemingway’s lost apprentice. The coincidences are numerous: a man’s inner strife is mitigated through travel, isolation, obsessions with writing and horses and
Mexico, and these are brought together ceremoniously in a Texas court of law. McCarthy’s work treats the same West Texas town, American men going to Mexico (and their wives/mothers going to California), and these are tied together in a trial about the ownership of a horse. The novel reads in some ways as a literary homage to Arnold Samuelson, the troubled young man Hemingway took under his wing in 1934—a man who was destroyed by life, though not defeated.

Notes:

1 Much of the source material for this paper is taken from Paul Hendrickson’s recent book, *Hemingway’s Boat: Everything he Loved in Life, and Lost 1934-1961*, which includes a comprehensive account of Samuelson’s life.

2 For more detailed information, see Eriksmoen.

3 Hemingway and Samuelson kept in contact sporadically over the years, exchanging Christmas cards and the occasional letter. Upon Hemingway’s death, Samuelson wrote a short piece entitled “E.H. A Coda from the Maestro.” Arnold Gingrich said it was the most moving thing he read about Hemingway’s death: “Ernest lived as long as he could. His last act was the most deliberate of his life. He had never written about his own suffering. He said it all without words in the language any man can understand” (qtd. in Gingrich).

4 Jack Kerouac was in Mexico in 1950, too, and both *On the Road* and *All the Pretty Horses* end in 1951, the centennial year of *Moby-Dick*’s publication. Neal Cassidy, the character on whom Dean Moriarty is based, died in Mexico, as does John Grady Cole (Brinkley 844-45). Kerouac would write about that event in a poem called “Mexico City Blues.”
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