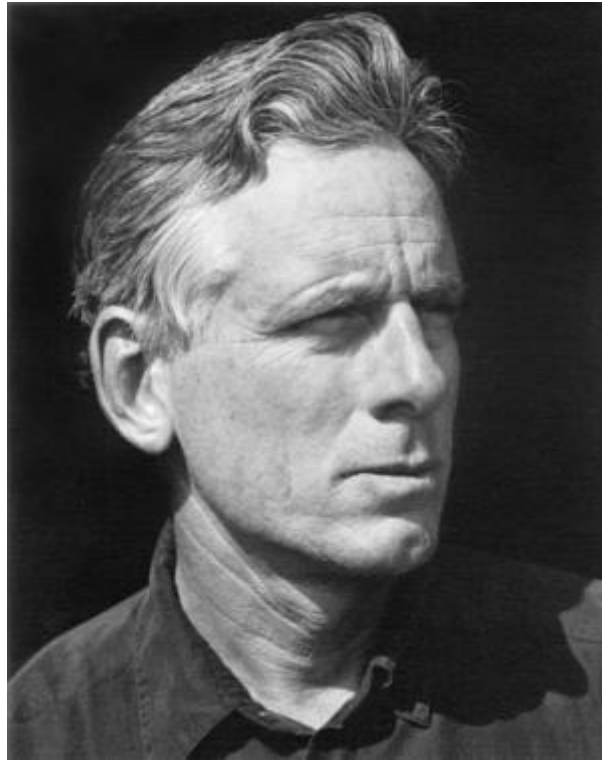


Thomas McGuane: FR&R'S Angler of the Year 2010

Novelist, conservationist, rancher and lifelong fly-fisher...

By: *Nick Lyons*

Original article can be found at: <http://www.flyrodreel.com/fly-fishing/thomas-mcguane-angler>



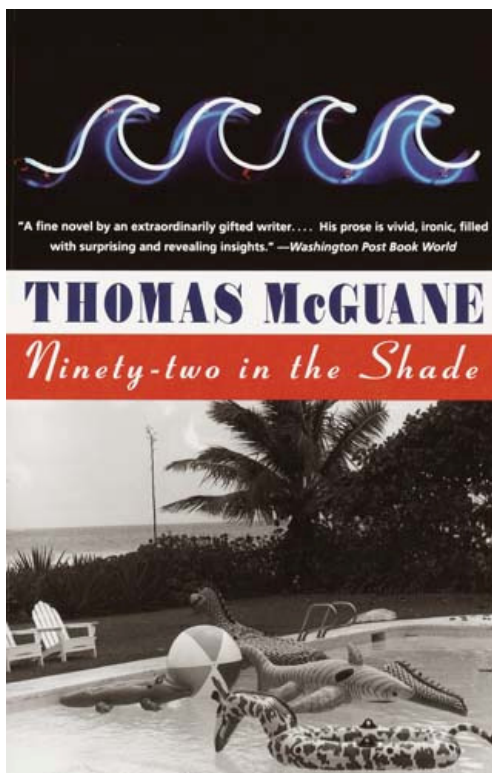
We fly fishers are always blessed when a major author turns some of his best words to our world, for such writers have the unique capacity to illuminate those junctures of angling and the rest of our lives. Hemingway comes to mind, though his "Big Two-Hearted River" is really not about catching trout, and those that Nick does catch are caught on live grasshoppers anyway. Except for some wet-fly fishing in Idaho, Wyoming and Europe, usually with a several-fly rig, Hemingway didn't much like fly-fishing or practice it, and he grew, as we all know, to prefer much larger game, chiefly caught by trolling.

In Tom McGuane we have a different species of writer. He has loved fly-fishing for more than five decades, since he fished the rivers and small creeks of Michigan as a boy; he has pursued trout, false albacore, steelhead, bonefish, striped bass, permit and salmon with great passion and success; he has fished from Tierra del Fuego to Russia, Iceland, New Zealand, Ireland, Canada, Florida and throughout his now-native Montana, and widely elsewhere; and along with his great novels and stories and films has written, with dazzling skill, much about what he calls his "life in fishing." He is *Fly Rod & Reel's* Angler of the Year and my Angler for the Last Hundred Years.

McGuane says that “what fishing ought to be about” is to use “the ceremony of our sport and passion to arouse greater reverberations within ourselves.” Reverberations: a richer response to all aspects of the natural world, perhaps—and our responsibilities to it; something telling about ourselves, surely; more about our subtle connections to all the texture and detail of fly-fishing; and a lot about our understanding of leisure and friendship and expertness and the enduring value of ritual, and so much more. Mostly, what we know about these matters comes from those with words—words that shock us into some new awareness, that, long after we’ve read them, echo in our brains.

This is, of course, what we call “literature” which is not something fancy dan or pretentious or irrelevant to any other matter in the universe, not sentimental (which is exaggerating sniffles), not trading ever in clichés (which is like claiming fish you haven’t caught). McGuane does these things in a major body of nearly a dozen novels, from *The Sporting Club* in 1968 to one he just finished, in time for a trip this past summer to Iceland and his annual fall trip to the Dean for steelhead, around which week he says he designs his year, “for these pools, these beautiful fish.” And he does it in what has become a major body of work about fly fishing—parts of *An Outside Chance*, all of *Live Water* and *The Longest Silence*. He is, as all of the best writers must be, a man on whom nothing is lost.

He knows that “the best angling is always a respite from burden,” not part of a competition or PR jaunt or a chance to transact business with those you fish with or a banquet for your ego. He knows we need to be stewards and riverkeepers, lest “there will be less than nothing, remnant populations, put-and-take, dim bulbs following the tank truck.” He knows how to make memorable and precise observations about our emotions and affections: “Young anglers love new rivers the way they love the rest of their lives.” McGuane has terrific fish-sense about what happens in the waters we fish, what we need to know to fish wisely: how “the bigger fish dominate the feeding stations where a better look is possible: the long seams, the well-defined riffle corners with the isometrics of current well spaced, the luxury apartments of streambred hydrology.”



And he can with his sharp and nimble diction shape experience memorably for us: “That evening we floated the Box Canyon through bird-filled shafts of declining light, the cold, clear water racing through a gallery of boulders where trout took up their stations for passing food.” I’ve floated that water too, at dusk, and no one could capture it more precisely.

McGuane’s prose can be remarkably angular, electric, sometimes ironic, often changing direction like the moves of a great athlete. And sometimes he is just deliciously witty, as in this, about the Key West he knew in the 1960s and 70s: “Half the people I knew had taken a Coast Guard exam and become ‘captains.’ Couples

became captains together...and I began to imagine a community where all were captains." I especially like his shrewd perceptions about angling and anglers, our quarry and our foibles: "My latest view of fish," he writes, "one I believe to be the evolutionary product of forty-five years of fly-fishing, is that everything has to do with smoothness, and that constantly changing one's mind results only in not catching fish." And: "All salmonids must be saluted for bearing upon their collective shoulders the burden of generations of contradictory theorizing as to what they want to eat and how they are best persuaded to give up their lives and freedom."

At times we get the intensity of fly-fishing by indirection: "With the rise over, the world began to reappear: trees, lake, river, village, wet clothes." His title essay in *The Longest Silence*, perhaps his single finest essay, is brilliant in framing the special intensity of permit fishing, its unique waiting periods for even a peek at the elusive fish, for that poignant hesitation before a refusal or take. "What is most emphatic in angling," he writes, "is made so by the long silences—the unproductive periods."

But finally it is the uncanny way he has of linking angling to our larger existence, in a thousand memorable instances, that stuns us most: "I was swept by the perfection of things: the glorious shape of each trout, the angelic miniature perfection of mayflies, and by the pure wild silk of the Big Hole River. For such things are we placed on this careening mudball."

McGuane turns 70 in December. Let this honor be a modest birthday present for someone who already has so many other honors, from the world of fly fishing—but the greater gift is his to us, the great presents he has given all fly fishers for all these years: his magical, defining words.

A former English professor and publisher, Nick Lyons is one of fly-fishing's leading linguists and is the author of My Secret Fishing Life and many other books.