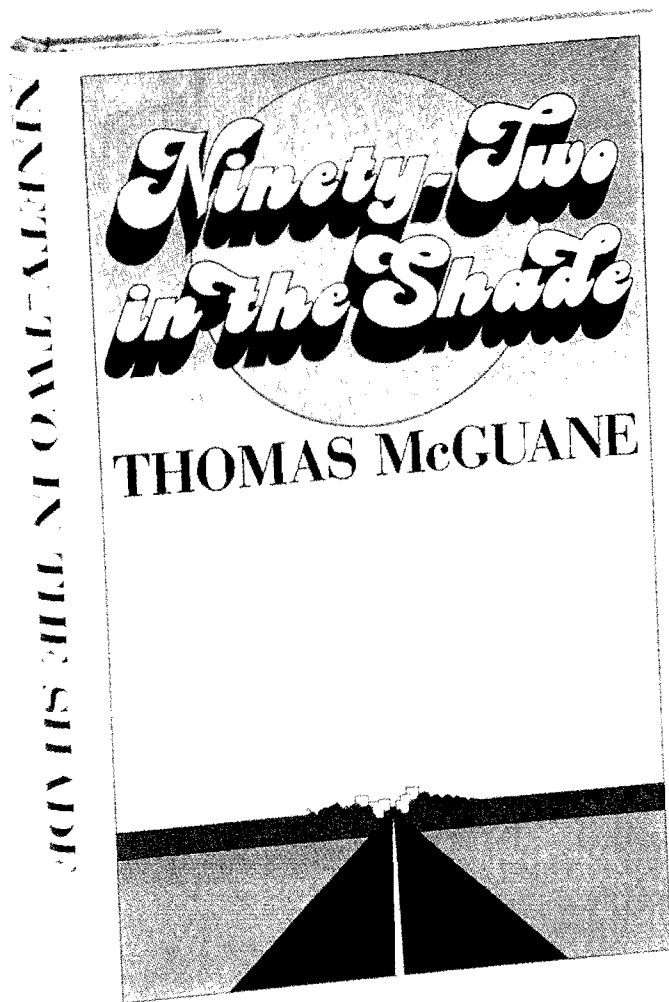


Collecting Thomas



Down by the dirty canal

The conversation was banal

She said you like Huck Finn

He said Tom Sawyer is who I've been

*She said you like Mark Twain—
try Thomas McGuane*

—“You’ve Got It Made”
Elliott Murphy

IT'S NOT OFTEN THAT ROCK MUSICIANS herald a writer—and a living, working writer at that. After all, rock and roll musicians are usually media royalty, the grist for many a journalistic mill, and the chroniclers and foretellers of their generations. But there is something about the literary aesthetic and the demeanor of an author like Thomas McGuane that transcends the purely academic. McGuane is one of those writers who is not only literary; he is also hip, informative and entertaining to read. McGuane seems to have his fingers on the pulse of the moment. As he ages and grows, so do his characters. They seem to mirror his personal trajectory, traversing the arc from feckless youth to sober maturity yet remaining vital and never losing their sense of humor.

My introduction to the works of McGuane was serendipity born of ennui and college-boy hedonism. As an English major at Ithaca College, I had toed the line of the course reading lists, and had my fill of

by STEVEN NESTER

McGuane

classics and curricula. Homer, Milton, Shakespeare—all the way to Hemingway and Jack Kerouac—were the subjects of endless classroom discussion, dissection and term papers. Esteemed artists to a man, and many of them giants upon whose shoulders the canon of Western Literature stands, they were once the state of the art in literature and spokesmen for their own generations. But as a 22-year-old with the hip legacy of the Beat Generation, the love of self-reliance and respect for the environment of the Transcendentalists, and the bacchanalian spirit of the Sixties as my own personal *Zeitgeist*, I needed more. I needed to find the writer who could reflect these attitudes.

In the spring of 1980, I found what I was looking for on the coffee table of a friend's rented house in Ithaca, New York. It was the type of house where Tom Skelton or Nicholas Payne—two of McGuane's most famous characters—might have felt comfortable. Chaos and the bonhomie of irreverent youth ruled. Sitting among empty beer cans, overflowing ashtrays, and other debris of the previous night's graduation party was a well-worn paperback edition of McGuane's *Ninety-two in the Shade*. I picked it up because I recalled watching a movie of the same name one rainy afternoon several years back, and I was curious. I could remember little of the movie except for a scene in which Peter Fonda's character was angry with some drinkers in a bar who were making him the butt of a joke I had missed. I sat on the moldering couch and opened the dog-eared copy. While Thomas Skelton was in the middle of an LSD trip, I got my first mind's eyeful of McGuane's visual and pointillistic language.

McGuane's best-known work, *Ninety-two in the Shade* made a profound impression on me. At a time when I was a young man with a literary bent, I



needed to hear a voice steeped in language that was beautiful, yet arch with irreverence, a voice sharp with contemporary observation and wit. McGuane's prose spoke to me and made sense of the world through a point of view I could share and relate to. To me, and



a tightly knit circle of friends who shared the same sensibility, McGuane was a writer who articulated the finer points of fly-fishing without sounding like a member of the Royal Family, possessed humbleness with a touch of ironic pomp and common sense, and displayed an acerbic and sarcastic view of the world and its mechanizations that made us laugh out loud.

McGuane seemed to know, along with his characters Nichol Dance and Nicholas Payne, that, "Upon occasion, a man had to manufacture his own hell-fire, either for himself or others: as one kind of home brew for the spirit's extremest voyages." Out of the torpor and randomness of life, one must take it upon one's self to get the spiritual lead out and lead the charge towards living. I began reading every book by McGuane I could get my hands on.

IN A CAREER SPANNING ALMOST 40 YEARS, Tom McGuane has published nine novels; a short story collection; three collections of essays on fishing, horses and the sporting life; journalism, and several

limited editions. He's directed a movie adaptation of his novel *Ninety-two in the Shade*. Many of his screenplays have made it to the theater, among them *Tom Horn*, *Rancho Deluxe* and *The Missouri Breaks*. A conservationist, outdoorsman and rancher, McGuane

most importantly speaks to a generation of readers who experienced the social and cultural upheavals of the 1960s, the saturnalia of the 1970s and the avariciousness of the 1980s and beyond, who see life as a process.

Though his books mostly take place in either Montana or Key West, where the local landscapes and cultures are characters in their own rights, McGuane debunks the idea of regional literature. This, even though he studied at Stanford under Wallace Stegner, the dean of contemporary American Western regional writing. "I don't believe in regional writing," McGuane says. "I don't even believe in 'American' writing. The problems and questions of literature are universal."

Proclaimed "a kind of language star" by Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow, McGuane's prose can leap from the surreal to the ironic to the sublime in a single bound. "I have always been intensely concerned with language, with prose and prose style," says McGuane, "I have consciously studied the prose stylists who interested me." His novels are peopled by men who are often on shaky terms with the times in which they live, the people

around them, and themselves. And in each book, the prose amazes, dazzles and renders unique his poetic vision.

McGuane does not take the writer's life sitting down. As a rancher, McGuane, along with his wife Laurie, breeds and rides champion cutting horses on his 8,000-acre ranch near McLeod, Montana. As a sportsman, McGuane has fly-fished the world from Patagonia to the former Soviet Union to small streams in Michigan. His love of the natural world and his contemplation of it have been well chronicled and have led to him becoming active in conservation organizations. Living in a time that values over-sized celebrity and the exaggerated behavior that often

accompanies it, McGuane has been a tabloid hero. Simply put, McGuane is a man's man. He talks the talk; he walks the walk; and he writes like no one else.

The son of a self-made auto parts manufacturer, McGuane was born in 1939 in Wyandotte, Michigan. McGuane recalls in his essay *Sons* that money was tight as his father tried to build a business, and there were periods of elation and depression as the family withstood the economic rigors. He describes himself as "a child who spent all possible time outdoors." Many of his sporting essays in *An Outside Chance*, collected in 1980 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, reflect his interest. From the humorous account of his parents losing control of a canoe and capsizing in a swiftly moving stream, to tales of adolescent adventure ending in the rather too high-spirited dynamiting of Indian mounds, McGuane's love of the outdoors began early.

A love of reading and literature was instilled in McGuane by his parents but, ironically, McGuane says, his development as a reader came late according to his clock, perhaps as a result of too much Huck Finn-like carousing in the woods. But, by the time he reached age 16, he was "committed to writing." What McGuane calls the "alchemy of literature" took hold and after 40 years has yet to let go, even with a vigorous outdoor life full of ranch duties, fishing trips and the demands of environmental altruism. In familiar deadpan style, McGuane adds, "It might have helped that there was not a movie theater in my town."

McGuane attended Michigan State University, where he shunned the beer bash scene and the budding drug culture to edit a literary journal. He graduated with honors in 1962 with a B.A. in Humanities. An M.F.A. from Yale Drama School followed in 1965. In 1966, McGuane won a prestigious Wallace Stegner Fellowship in creative writing at Stanford University, and attended in 1967. Once out into the world and pushing 30, McGuane had no interest in what was now a successful family business. He was trained in the craft of writing; there was nothing else to do but write novels.

Published by Simon and Schuster in 1969 to stellar reviews, *The Sporting Club* put Tom McGuane on

the literary scene. *The Sporting Club* is a satire of the fictitious Centennial Club, a stuffy and rustic private fishing camp in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, whose members are the elite of Detroit and the automobile industry. Fledgling auto-tycoon James Quinn arrives at the club looking for quiet and rest. His old friend and rival, Vernor Stanton, has built a dueling gallery stocked with pricey, yet very functional, antique dueling pistols. The challenges from Vernor begin and the game of dare escalates from duels with wax blanks to dynamitings and cataclysmic violence. The denouement of this apocalyptic satire is bared when the club's 100-year-old time capsule is opened.

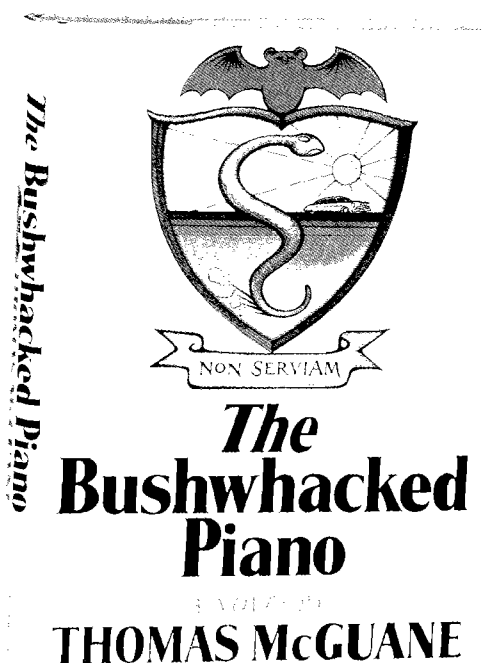
In 1971, Simon and Schuster published McGuane's comic and picaresque *The Bushwhacked Piano*. The novel, which won the Richard and Hilda Rosenthal Foundation Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, is a scattergun fusillade on American society. It introduced Nicholas Payne, a disaffected and lovesick young man, a romantic-at-large in an America overrun with consumerism and junk-culture. The hip generation's Holden Caulfield, Payne sees his country defiled by the phonies and

squares who populate and run it: "the whole, lurid panorama of cloacal American nature smarm debouching into Lake Erie—where Payne was duck hunting—a turn of his oar against the bottom brought up a blue whirring nimbus of petroleum sludge and toxic, coagulant effluents the glad hand of national industry wants the kids to swim in."

McGuane's powers of description and gift for poetic language are in full bloom in *The Bushwhacked Piano*. The book is virtually one hilarious bon mot, one gorgeous visual description, one vivid scene with choice word arrangements one after another. America is described as a "floating crap game of strangling spiritual credit." Time is "the shit that hits everybody's fan."

Payne muses on "Truman's Kansas City suits and essential Calvinized watch fob of insouciance of the pre-Italian racketeer." Language star, indeed!

Turning his back on his huge potential in the adult world, Payne spends his time being tortured by Anne Fitzgerald, the daughter of a socially prominent Detroit family. Payne has the hots for her in a bad

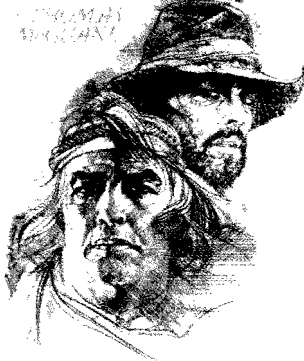


way. While chasing Anne in a souped-up Hudson Hornet to her family's ranch in Montana, Payne becomes the business partner of C.J. Clovis, a shameless huckster and bat tower salesman who is out to fleece whoever comes into view. In one of McGuane's more hilarious metaphors, Clovis, during the course of the book, loses both arms and both legs to amputation, and is fitted with prosthetics. Not only are Clovis' appendages fake, McGuane implies that Clovis, the quintessential American business hustler, is spiritually and morally specious as well.

Nicholas Payne is the character most readers like to associate with a young Tom McGuane. This is a game all readers like to play with authors and their works, but with McGuane it seems especially fun because the power of his writing makes Payne come alive as a flawed, complicated and sympathetic Don Quixote driving a 1950s hot rod. The reader begins to think that this tortured anti-hero could live somewhere as Tom McGuane. Payne wears his heart—and his id—on his sleeve, as he acts out every impulse in his quest to rescue his love from the grasp of Twentieth-century ogres—the soulless industrialists. Payne approaches life nonstop, straight up and with unbridled passion. And for a while, so did McGuane.

McGuane says, "Nicholas Payne was perhaps a self-idealization or exaggeration," but comments that in fiction writing, "All writers must, at some level, draw their work from their lives. In my case, the resemblance is close." The motorcycle rides that Nicholas Payne takes along the coastal roads of northern California echo the sea coast motorcycle trips McGuane describes in the essay "Me, My Motorcycle, and Why" in the 1980 collection *An Outside Chance*. McGuane describes Payne's life north of San Francisco Bay in the bohemian enclave of Bolinas, land of fragrant eucalyptus and cedar as idyllic, where dinner could be had of shellfish from the sea's

THE MISSOURI BREAKS



Thomas
McGuane

provender, along with a little third press mountain white and fresh fennel. But Payne isn't suited to contentment. With San Francisco "dark with Swamis," he soon hits the road looking to rekindle his affair with Anne.

McGuane remembers the Bay Area and some of its day-glo denizens in his essay "Twilight on the Buffalo Paddock," which was collected in *An Outside Chance*. It was 1966—the Summer of Love—and McGuane was visiting the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. McGuane juxtaposes the "twenty-first-century transcendentalist visionaries with electro frizzy hairdos" who wander through the park with the buttoned-down members of the 70-year-old fishing organization, which he calls "Vitalis Central." If you add to this mix a small herd of buffalo—the symbol of the untamed American West—that inhabits a paddock in the park, you get a quick study in the themes of McGuane's fiction and a glimpse at how his experiences shaped it.

Pressured by the family of the woman he loves, and given to drama, the grand gesture and soliloquies, Payne explains himself: "What do I believe in? I believe in happiness, birth control, generosity, fast cars, environmental sanity, Coors beer, Merle Haggard, upland game birds, expensive optics... canoes, skiffs and sloops, horses that will not allow themselves to be ridden, speeches made under duress..." It is difficult to resist an underdog like Payne; and it is attractive to believe that it's almost possible for someone as flawed, yet as charismatic, as Payne to exist.

In 1973, Farrar, Straus and Giroux published *Ninety-two in the Shade*. McGuane's third and perhaps most recognized book, *Ninety-two in the Shade* was nominated for the National Book Award. This is the work,

according to book dealer Ken Lopez, that made McGuane an author book collectors and readers began paying attention to. Set in the Florida Keys in the fluid juncture between the death of Haight-Ashbury and the hippie Diaspora to rural America, *Ninety-two* is the story of the first and last stand of

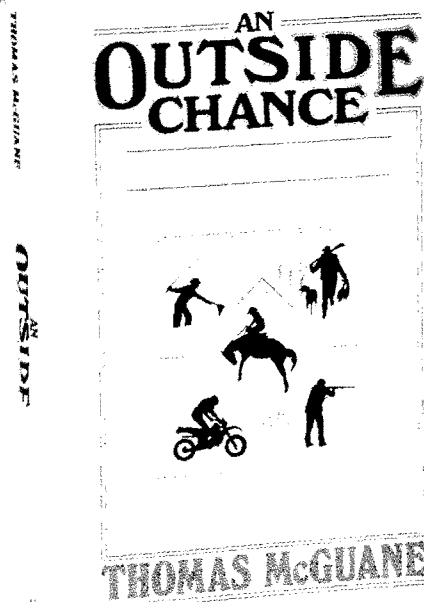
Tom Skelton. Skelton's father is a spiritually depleted man; surrounded by failed schemes and plans, he can barely get out of bed in the morning. Skelton's mother is a patient woman with a racy past, a former "high flyer from Miami." Skelton himself is a man determined to act.

Skelton must negotiate his way into the world of flats-fishing guides in an America that still has frontier towns like Key West where men live and die by their own laws. Standing in Skelton's way is Nichol Dance—pun intended—a former Hoosier tavern owner run out of town after drinking away his inheritance and murdering an exercise boy from Lexington, Kentucky. Dance decides to go to Florida, the "part of the world of American bad actors who, when the chips are down, go to Florida with all the gothics and grotesqueries of chrome and poured-to-form concrete that that implies." He makes his way down to the Keys and, when he gets to Key West, his car explodes. His possessions are gone. Dance ought to feel wiped out, but instead he feels relieved. "Dance had the Bisley Colt in the top of his pants underneath a palm-leafed sport shirt he bought in St. Augustine and great alligator tears swam down his cheeks. The truth was he felt free as a bird."

A man happy with no prospects is a man to be feared. This is Nichol Dance's last chance at redemption. After spending time paying his dues—through odd jobs, peon work, and a quickie bad marriage—he becomes a flats guide. When he hears of Skelton's intention to do the same, Dance warns him in no uncertain terms to find another profession. But Skelton sees his choice of occupation as his fate. His mind is made up to become a guide and the two men began a dance of brinkmanship that ends in death.

McGuane's characters in

Ninety-two in the Shade are the richest and most provoking he had created up to that time. Considering the maniacal inventiveness and single-mindedness of Vernor Stanton and Nicholas Payne, this is really saying something. But Skelton and Dance are less antic and do not act out all their inner motivations in the exaggerated manner of McGuane's two earlier leading men. While Vernor Stanton and Nicholas Payne may sometimes appear to be nothing more than cartoon characters with a great script, Skelton and Dance are mature portraits painted with depth and dimension. The Dali-esque deadpan dialogue and the absurd situations are still present and as brilliantly written as in the previous books. The tone of *Ninety-two* seems to reflect the seriousness of the dilemma Skelton and



AN OUTSIDE CHANCE

CLASSIC & NEW
ESSAYS ON SPORT

THOMAS
MCGUANE

INTRODUCTION BY
GEOFFREY WOLFF

Dance find themselves in.

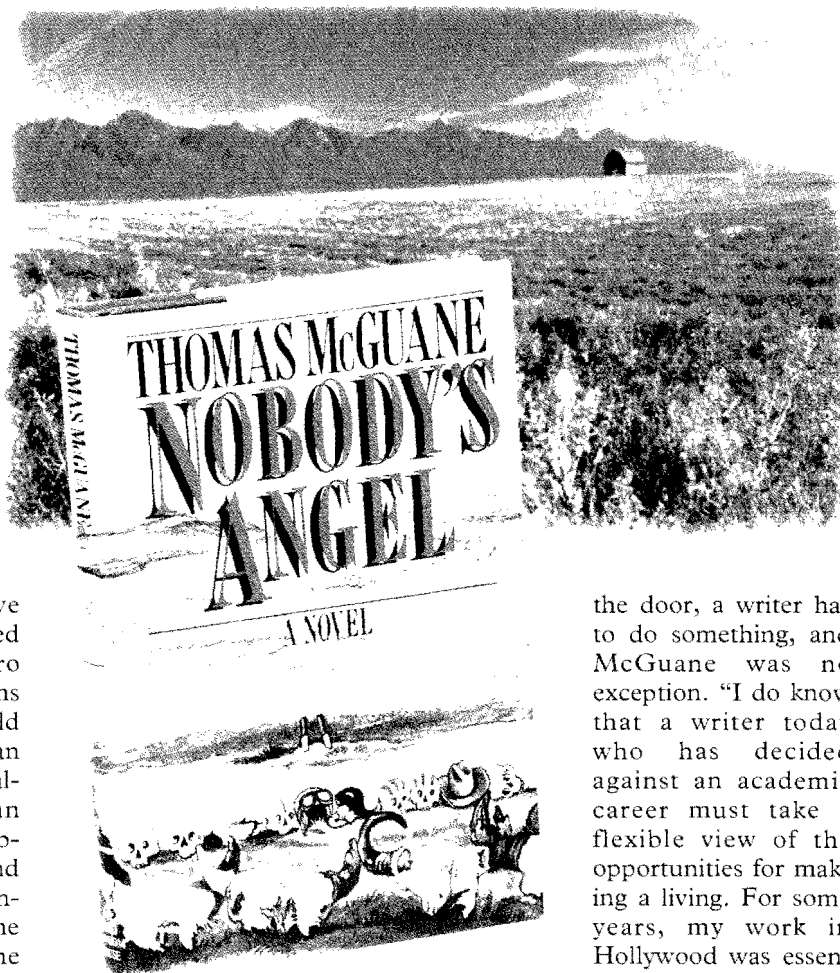
McGuane's compulsion to comment on the state of things, in particular the republic of the United States of America and its inhabitants, remains undampened. At the beginning of *Ninety-two*, Skelton is hallucinating on an LSD trip. He hitchhikes home and is given a ride by a hardware salesman. In his delirium Skelton tells the man that the paint on the car has just lifted off in an entire sheet. The driver agrees and complains about the shoddy manufacturing in Detroit. Nothing more is said. "This was the epoch of uneasy alliances," says the author. Later in the book, loosening up with the delivery but maintaining the same seriousness of content, McGuane comments on complacent presumption and the chauvinistic attitude prevalent in middle America. America is the place where "After each electrocution, the officials of the republic get together for a real down home Christian burial out of that indomitable American conviction that even God likes fried food."

Aside from the determination of Skelton and the white-trash game face of Dance, the outrageous characterization readers have come to expect from McGuane is saved for Skelton's grandfather Goldsboro Skelton, the family patriarch. In terms of over-the-top speech and action, old man Skelton steals the show. A man who started his career as a marine salvager, he later became a politician renowned "in the state senate [for] fabricating remunerative franchises around the state and established a gerrymandered kingdom for himself that in the face of subsequent investigations at the federal level proved to have nine lives; in countless Gulf Coast communities Skelton's grandfather was revered unseen and unmet as only a crook of limitless cynicism can be revered."

Whether bouncing naked on a trampoline in his office with his secretary or nearly escaping with his life after receiving both barrels of a shotgun for demanding a cut of backroom gambling run by Cuban expatriates, Goldsboro Skelton is a man who gets things done in his own flagrant and single-minded way. He and his grandson have much in common.

After having written three books and many pieces of journalism between 1969 and 1973, McGuane's career took a turn towards Hollywood and

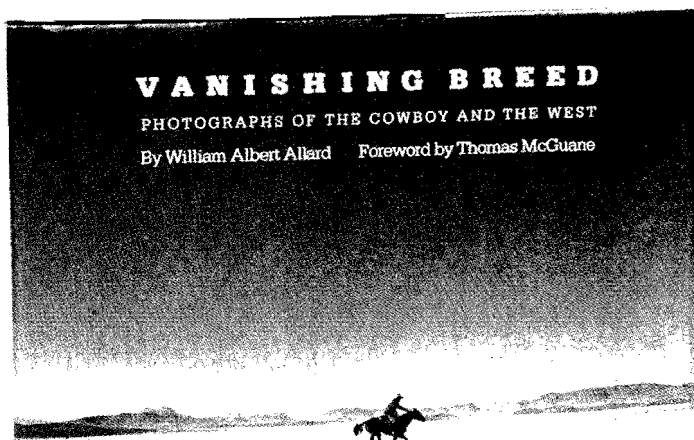
moviemaking. This isn't such divergent a course: while at Yale, McGuane had written several unproduced plays. And in the lonely, cutthroat world of the full-time novelist, making a buck sometimes depends on one's ability to work as a hired gun. The accounts of the travails of writers in Hollywood—from F. Scott Fitzgerald to William Faulkner—are the stuff of legend and heartbreak. But when the bill collector is at



the door, a writer has to do something, and McGuane was no exception. "I do know that a writer today who has decided against an academic career must take a flexible view of the opportunities for making a living. For some years, my work in Hollywood was essential to my survival."

McGuane's relationship with the movie business began when he sold the movie rights to *The Sporting Club* in the late 1960s. The movie was released in 1971 to poor reviews, but the proceeds paid for a small ranch in Paradise Valley, Montana. McGuane relocated from Key West with his wife and young son, Thomas IV, in 1968. For a serious trout fisherman who harbored a desire since childhood to be a cowboy, a Montana cattle ranch was a natural choice.

Up until McGuane's arrival, the big sky of Montana was a place for ranchers and visiting sportsman. But with McGuane came writing and fishing friends



such as William Hjortsberg, Richard Brautigan and Jim Harrison. When two of McGuane's original screenplays—the cult classic *Rancho Deluxe* (1975) and the big-budget *The Missouri Breaks* (1976)—were filmed in Montana, actors such as Jeff Bridges, Peter Fonda, and Warren Oates soon followed. The environs of Livingston, Montana became a scene for the Hollywood crowd. And the next several years of McGuane's life would provide plenty of material for those with a taste for tabloids.

McGuane's next step in the world of moviemaking came when he directed *Ninety-two in the Shade*. He was given the opportunity to direct in exchange for writing the screenplay for *The*

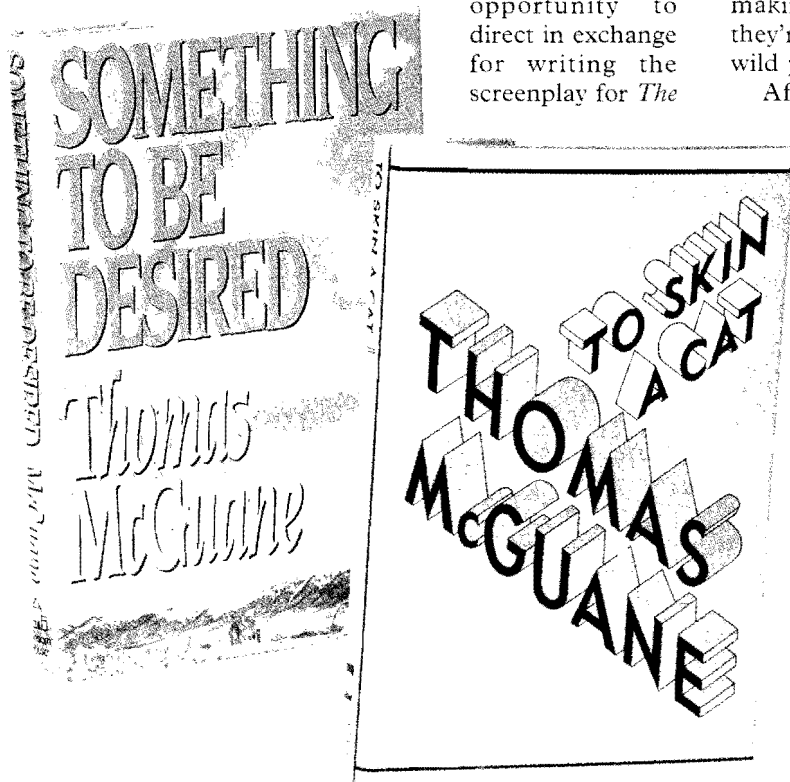
Missouri Breaks. Filmed on location and released in 1975, the cast of *Ninety-two* is a Who's Who of hipsters and acting stalwarts. Peter Fonda, Warren Oates, Margot Kidder, Harry Dean Stanton, Sylvia Miles, Elizabeth Ashley, William Hickey, Louise Latham and Burgess Meredith peopled McGuane's classic. The film is somewhat uneven, but much of McGuane's absurdist/hard guy dialogue and situations translate well to the screen.

Screenplays for several more movies followed, most of them going unproduced. In 1979 McGuane penned *Tom Horn*, which starred Steve McQueen in his next-to-last role as a Wyoming bounty hunter. In 1987, after collaborating on the screenplay *Cold Feet* with Jim Harrison, McGuane finally severed his ties with Hollywood. "I've gotten away from screenwriting. I'm no longer involved in the movie business and can hardly remember what interested me about it."

Up until the filming of *Ninety-two*, McGuane was married to Portia "Becky" Crockett, a direct descendent of frontiersman Davy Crockett. But, according to author and screenwriter friend William Hjortsberg, "Tom got a little manic." McGuane became famous and began living a high-octane lifestyle. Though parties and the Hollywood crowd seemed to take up quite a bit of time, McGuane puts it all in perspective by noting that most of his time was spent writing journalism and film scripts, the type of money-making deskwork grind that writers pursue when they're not concentrating on novels. But rumors of wild partying continued.

After the filming *Ninety-two*, Crockett left McGuane for Peter Fonda. McGuane was then married to Margot Kidder for nine months. The union produced a daughter, Maggie. Then followed a relationship with actress Elizabeth Ashley, who had a lead in *Rancho Deluxe*. This liaison earned him plenty of mention in Ashley's 1978 memoir *Actress*. In 1977, McGuane married Laurie Buffet, sister of rock musician and Key West troubadour Jimmy Buffet.

Hearing about all the commotion and the Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice lifestyle that seemed to have been going on, *People* magazine came to Montana for a look around. For a while, the language star seemed to have changed into a media star. McGuane was briefly and brutally tabloid fodder. The interest was in his lifestyle, not his books. Too much media exposure and extracurricular activities have ruined some writers who were unable to resist the seduction of the lime-light. McGuane, however, was able to return



to the written page, but not without taking a hit.

In 1978, McGuane's novel *Panama* was published and was soundly drubbed by critics. The author's reputation seemed for the first time to teeter. Dedicated to Jim Harrison, *Panama* is the story of an overnight sensation whose 15 minutes of fame as a rock star have ended. No longer the object of national attention, Chester "Chet" Hunnicutt Pomeroy returns home to Key West to regroup and, perhaps, win back the love of Catherine, the woman he married several years earlier in Panama. The only McGuane novel written in the first person, *Panama* is a frenetic and chaotic meditation on fame that seems to reflect on McGuane's immediate past in a very personal way. The death of his parents and sister within a span of three years, combined with the fact that his career and personal life were in a tailspin, had turned McGuane into an "unpleasant drinker."

In *Panama*, McGuane slams the movie business through the character of Morey, an unctuous and foul Hollywood agent whose unspeakable behavior is only overshadowed by members of the Hollywood crowd he



tattles on. In one scene, the shell-shocked Chet reads "a pile of scandal magazines to see what had hit friends and loved ones." The over-the-top metaphors continue in *Panama*. One of Chet's most infamous stage tricks is emerging from the derriere of a stuffed elephant, a comment on pop culture that cannot be overlooked.

In 1980, McGuane quit drinking. That same year, his wife Laurie gave birth to a daughter, Annie. Three

years later, McGuane moved his family to the Raw Deal Ranch in sparsely settled McLeod, Montana.

Over the following six years, McGuane published two novels and a collection of short stories, and became interested in producing limited edition volumes. As the author turned his back on living large and loud, so did his characters. McGuane's male characters, while still wrestling with inner demons, make an effort to grow up and act responsibly. They may be wifeless—and some are fathers—but they begin trying to act sensibly for themselves and their families.

In his first four novels, McGuane seemed to play to the balcony, flexing his literary muscle and leaving no idea or flourish behind in an early draft. But the tone is more somber in his most recent five novels. His characters, lusty as ever and sometimes finding themselves in impossible situations of their own devising, are more able to reflect and to contemplate their predicaments with patience and intelligence—at least for a little while.

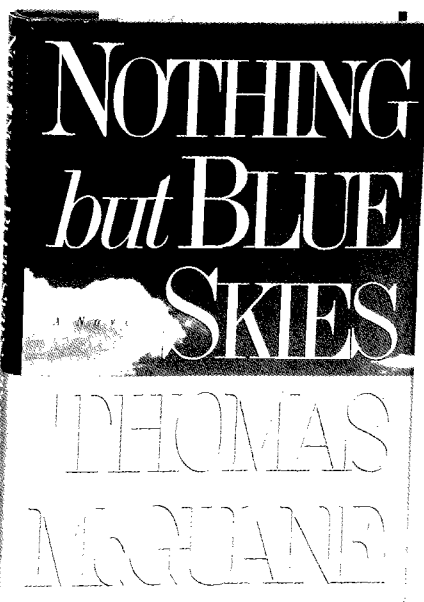
In 1982's *Nobody's Angel* (Random House), Patrick Fitzgerald returns to Montana to run the family horse ranch. Once back home, Patrick is assailed with the family's emotional baggage. His father is deceased and his mother has remarried. His sister Mary, once a local prostitute, is now with child and living with an Indian ranch hand. She soon disappears. Patrick has his own share of woes. He is in love with Claire. To win Claire, Patrick must get past Tio, her husband. Feeling sorry for himself, his family and his plight, Patrick thinks to himself, "One book I wouldn't take to a desert island is a family album."

The man Elizabeth Ashley called an "aging juvenile delinquent" gained financial security in the 1970s and 1980s and, as a result, can now pretty much live the life he wants. The successful auto parts company he inherited from his father and a series of land deals and lucrative movie deals have made him comfortable. His fictional characters have reflected this change. Once peopled by raucous and rugged hippie-wranglers, his books are now more apt to portray the lives of hard-bitten Montanans who have forsaken the family ranch for a life of business in town.

McGuane's first three novels were ones of youth preoccupied and sometimes hell-bent on finding their place in the world or perhaps testing themselves. Book number four, *Panama*, portrayed the chaotic transition from the intoxicating irresponsibility of fame. The last five books are the bumpy and tumbling lives of middle-aged men and women looking for contentment, redemption and responsibility, fulfilled in a new kind of American West.

In 1982, McGuane began getting involved in the production of limited editions. *The Vanishing Breed* is a book of photographs taken by William Albert Allard, with an introduction by McGuane. Published by New York Graphic Society/Little, Brown, the volume is a 144-page photo documentation of contemporary working cowboys in the American West. 750 copies signed by McGuane and Allard were issued in slipcase. A trade edition was published the same year. *In the Crazies*, a 1985 collaboration with Montana artist and friend Russell Chatham, is a portfolio of 10 of Chatham's paintings with an introduction by McGuane. Of the 190 copies issued, 185 were signed by McGuane and Chatham. The volume is pricey. A copy in fine condition can run a collector up to \$2,500. *Sons*, a paean to just that, was issued in 1993, signed and numbered in a slipcase in an edition of 300 copies. In 1996, Meadow Run Press issued *Live Water*, a collection of 12 of McGuane's fishing essays. Issued without dust wrapper in a slipcase, the run of 1,500 copies was issued unsigned.

Back in the meat-and-potatoes world of a working writer, McGuane published another novel in 1984. *Something to be Desired*, published by Random House, is the story of Lucien Taylor, a diplomat who thinks with his libido. Women are to Taylor "pocket mirrors" that enable him to keep tabs on his youth, prowess and vanity. When his old college flame, Emily, is arrested for the murder of her husband, Lucien abandons his wife



Suzanne and son James and heads to Montana to post her bond. When Emily skips bail with her hired hand, Lucien comes into possession of her ranch, which has a hot spring on it. He quickly turns the property into a lucrative spa. He ought to live happily ever after, but success turns Lucien blue. He is wealthy and respected, yet something is missing.

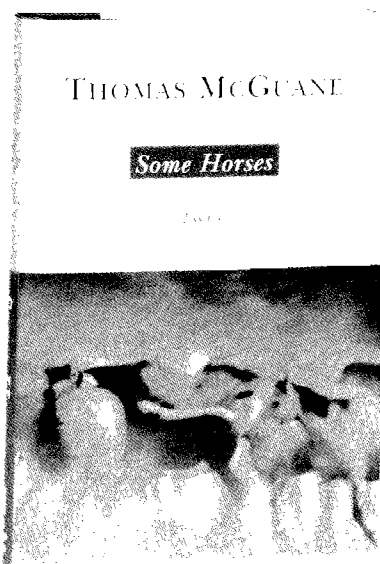
After chasing and catching almost every skirt in town, he decides he wants his family back. Abandoned by his father when he was a child, Lucien wishes to reforge his relationship with his own son. He has fallen back in love with his ex-wife.

When she and their son come to the spa for an extended visit, Lucien pledges his love and Suzanne sticks his nose in every fault she can find. To win her back, he must work. Word soon arrives that Emily has killed her lover and is on the move again. She winds up at the spa. She wants sanctuary and Lucien. This is the Lucien's ultimate test.

In 1986, Dutton published *To Skin a Cat*, a collection of McGuane short stories. It wasn't until 1989—5 years after the appearance of his last novel—that his next one, *Keep the Change*, was published by Houghton, Mifflin. *Keep the Change* is the story of Joe Stark, a Montana boy who ends up a successful painter living in Florida. Stark has wealth and women and wants for nothing material, but he also suffers from the inner dissatisfaction common to most of McGuane's heroes. In an attempt to cure his spiritual turmoil, Joe steals his girlfriend's car and drives back to Montana to reclaim the ranch left to him by his father.

This cross-country trek is an opportunity for Stark to comment on all that is hideous and wrong with this country. The bankers Stark meets are more likely to discuss tax dodges than financing for a cattle ranch in decline. The local bank wishes Stark would forget about cows and "orient his antenna to the twentieth century." This might mean setting up a business where you could "shoot a buffalo and put it on your credit card."

Stark finds that the people he knew as a teenaged ranch hand have changed. Ellen, the rancher's daughter Stark deflowered so many years ago, is a golfer. The term "driving range" takes on a

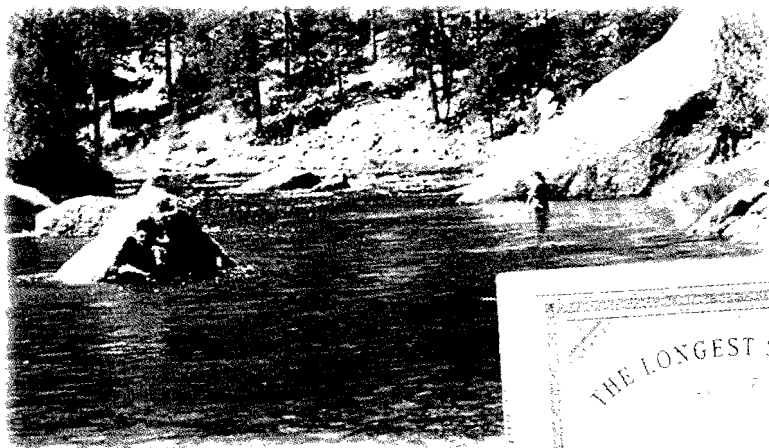


whole new perspective when it is located on a prairie where buffalo and cattle roam. For a time, Ellen is the object of the lovesick Stark's affections. She uses him like a toy and as leverage to win back her estranged husband, a real cowboy. To make matters worse, Ellen tells Stark their brief tryst so many years ago resulted in the daughter her husband thinks is his own.

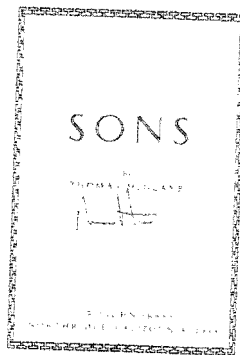
The deed to Stark's ranch is in the hands of his spinster aunt and her half-wit brother, whose financial chicanery threatens to bankrupt an already teetering enterprise. Stark's land has been leased to Ellen's father, who wants to own it outright. Between women, relatives, running a business, and being chased by his demons, Stark has his hands full.

Readers of *Keep the Change* found McGuane's writing style had not changed. Smart and swift dialogue, eye-popping descriptions, and humans enmeshed in situations just a lariat's length away from the absurd made the book a very well-received return to the novel for McGuane.

In 1992, Houghton Mifflin published McGuane's



Nothing but Blue Skies. Frank Copenhaver is a successful businessman with a cast-iron libido. When his wife Gracie leaves him, Frank and his business ventures fall apart. The bank is about to foreclose on everything. Frank can't concentrate on his small empire and he can't control his impulses. He chases skirts, gets drunk, steals cars and is arrested. He pines for his wife. Instead of solving his problems like an adult, he goes fishing. Frank suffers from a spiritual malaise that seems to have



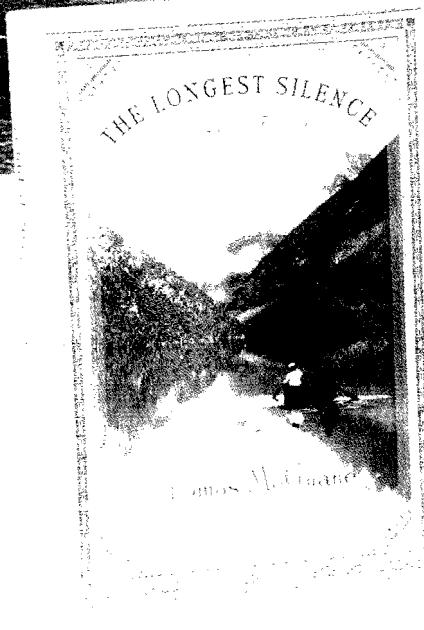
bypassed the rest of his former hippie friends who, like Frank, have made their way past survival to success.

Frank sees himself as a failure. Nothing he does can chase the demons away. He owns a cattle ranch, but thinks he's becoming the type of person who is turning the West upside down. The locals bemoan the influx of outsiders and how the prairie is being turned into housing developments. The newcomers don't ranch; they buy cattle futures and study the Dow Jones Industrials. Wearing a Stetson just makes it seem okay. To Frank's dismay, his one act of fiscal responsibility would be to sell his family ranch, the only remaining link to his heritage.

Frank's college-age daughter, Holly, is upset about the ranch sale and her parents' impending divorce. She introduces her parents her new boyfriend Lane, a 50-something lawyer and right-wing political activist whose agenda is damming every river in Montana to keep the water in the state. Holly has begun carrying a concealed weapon. The Copenhavers are very upset. They see their daughter's behavior as a ploy to get their attention and bring them back together. It works.

Nothing but Blue Skies has the brilliant descriptions of the natural world and the terse, quip-like dialogue one looks for in a McGuane novel. The book has something even more: a mature person's take on life, responsibility, and parenthood. Nicholas Payne, it seems, has grown up. He is now walking a marathon in the shoes of the parents he once tortured while in pursuit of their daughters. As Gracie and Frank begin a tenuous reconciliation, there is also wisdom. Says Gracie, "There's nothing crazier than picking up exactly where you left off." But life, they know, is crazy.

It was 10 years before another McGuane novel was published, but in that time there was plenty for the author to do. Journalism, fishing trophy streams and rivers of the world, environmental causes,



cutting horse competitions and the demands of running a ranch kept McGuane busy. Renamed Gladstone Ranch, the McGuane ranch was now home to championship cutting horses and their riders, Tom and Laurie McGuane.

A cutting horse is a highly trained animal that assists in herding, collecting and sorting cattle. The horse uses its body to sort cattle one by one in a kind of prairie *pas de deux*. Breeding cutting horses and competing in cutting horse events has become a large part of the McGuanes' life in rural Montana, so much so that Laurie has become the chairman of the Montana Cutting Horse Association. Both she and her husband have ridden their mounts to state championships and have consistently placed in the top 10. It only follows that McGuane should write about them.

McGuane's collected journalism is a window into the years between his recent novels. His 1980 collection of sporting essays, *An Outside Chance*, was updated and reissued in 1990. Lyons Press, a publishing house run by New Yorker and ardent fisherman Nick Lyons, culled the new edition of *An Outside Chance* (Houghton Mifflin, 1990) for horse stories, added some new pieces, and published them as *Some Horses* in 1999. As for fishing, McGuane and his notebook have traveled everywhere from Iceland to Ireland, Argentina and the former Soviet Union, to the salmon streams of Canada and the thousands of miles of saltwater flats in the Caribbean basin. Snook, tarpon, bonefish, salmon and trout have been his prey. Again, *An Outside Chance* provided material for a new collection of stories. *The Longest Silence: A Life in Fishing* was published in 1999 by Alfred A. Knopf. The book consists of selections from *An Outside Chance* to which were added new fishing essays. (There is something to be said for the collection *An Outside Chance*. If being published in an updated edition in 1990, and then being taken apart for two different collections of essays wasn't enough of a tribute to the beautiful writing inside, *Sports Illustrated* rates *An Outside Chance* Number 40 in the top 100 sporting books ever published.)

McGuane's love of nature and the natural world in

all its forms has determined where and how he has lived. His conservation activities include directorships of American Rivers and of the Craighead Wildlife-Wildlands Institute. American Rivers is a national organization dedicated to preserving waterways, promoting river health, dam removal, allocation of water sources, watershed protection, and wildlife conservation. Water is a valuable commodity in Montana. There isn't enough to go around; cattle and crops

both need it, and allowing rivers to run unimpeded to neighboring states gets some of McGuane's characters hot under the collar. As a rancher, McGuane has a personal interest that spills over into his books set in Montana, where water rights is a frequent topic. The Craighead Wildlife-Wildlands Institute, another conservation organization to which McGuane gives his time, is run by the University of Montana's School of

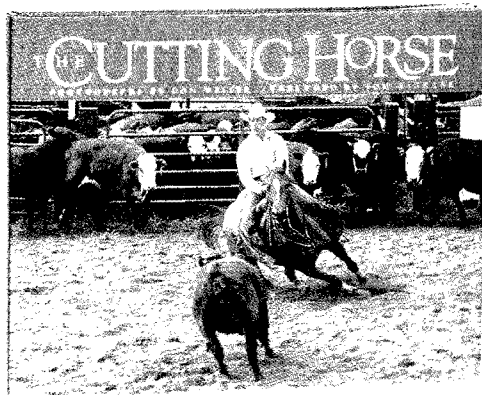
Forestry and is concerned with the allocation and management of wilderness areas.

McGuane looks at the long periods when novel writing is not a priority as "restorative" and an important component of his creative process. Fishing, ranching, raising and training horses and other pursuits "add to the enthusiasm for life itself, from which the urge to create anything arises." But, he adds, "While it is hard to admit, they may be evasions from the daily grind of desk work."

In 2002, Alfred A. Knopf published *The Cadence of Grass*, McGuane's ninth and most recent novel. *The Cadence of Grass* is a dark book. Where most of McGuane's characters could be viewed as somewhat silly as they wandered through life, and their outrageous predicaments might endear them to the reader, some of the people here are downright mean. *The Cadence of Grass* is the story of Sunny Jim

Whitelaw and his attempts to control his dysfunctional family.

The Whitelaws stand to prosper from Sunny Jim's bottling plant if his daughter Evelyn and her estranged husband, Paul, reconcile. Another son-in-law, Stuart, is the manager of the plant, but it is Paul who is Sunny Jim's favorite.



Fresh from prison, Paul is a nasty character. Not only has he been carrying on with his parole officer, he's been bedding his sister-in-law, Natalie, as well. His loathsomeness goes way back, though. Driving home with Sunny Jim after a night of drinking, Paul runs over a motorcyclist and kills him. Paul convinces Sunny Jim that *he* was driving the car that killed the motorcyclist. Paul tells Sunny Jim that he switched places in the driver's seat to spare Sunny Jim a prison sentence.

Sunny Jim's daughters, Evelyn and Natalie, are the strongest and most visible women McGuane has created. The sisters pine for no man. They have the intelligence and grit to take care of themselves in the winding-down of the American West, when cowboys and ranch life have become almost superfluous. And behind every strong daughter is a strong mother. Alice Whitelaw, matriarch and wife of Sunny Jim, has her own strengths and secrets. Bill Champion, the ranch foreman who taught Evelyn and Natalie about horses, cattle and ranch life, is Alice's former husband and the girls' father.

Skullduggery runs through *The Cadence of Grass*. Paul enlists Bill Champion to help him smuggle dope across the border from Canada. Sensing danger, Champion pushes Paul out of their rowboat into the freezing river. Paul recovers, takes Bill's dry clothes, and sends the 75-year-old man into the darkness to die. Later, Paul takes the contraband to the drug dealer who, with an eye colder than Paul's, leads him to the grave that has been dug for him.

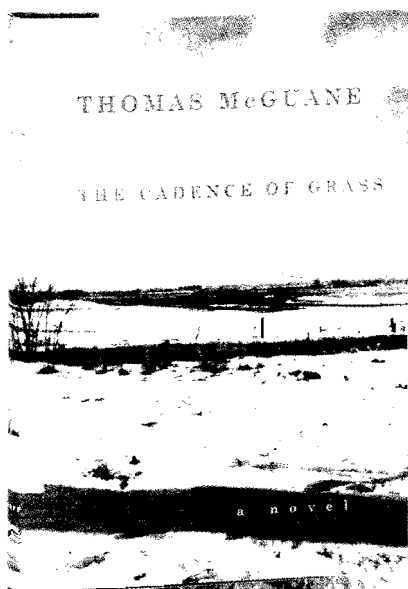
At the end of the book, readers are left with the last thoughts of Bill Champion as he freezes to death in the Montana wilderness. Bill's last thoughts are of John Red Wolf, a fellow small-town boy who was Bill's friend during World War Two. In his thoughts, death surrounds Champion and his battleship crewmates. There in the star-flecked night, Champion walks to his own death with grace and composure, the wisdom of a hard-fought life allowing him to accept the inevitable.

Inevitably, comparisons are made between McGuane and Ernest Hemingway. This confounds McGuane. Their styles have nothing in common, as familiarity with their books shows. These compar-

isons between McGuane and Ernest Hemingway, the archetypal writer/outdoorsman, come easily because they are superficial, and don't ring true on any level. Still, it is a situation that any writer who hunts or fishes must endure. One can be likened to Papa these days just by jotting down 'can of tuna' on a shopping list. In the essay *Horses*, McGuane ponders Hemingway's lack of interest in them. He considers that

Hemingway's callous lack of sentiment while viewing the violent goring of horses during of a bullfight might cause him to reappraise Hemingway, and perhaps "wonder at him anew."

In 2002, longtime friend Jim Harrison published *Off to the Side*, a memoir of his childhood in Michigan, his coming of age as a man and a writer, and an eloquent cataloging and exposition of his thoughts on many topics. The book is a serious and humorous look at Harrison's life and the people who shared it. Thomas McGuane, of course, is mentioned as a friend, fellow



writer and outdoor enthusiast. In terms of gossip appeal, blessedly there is none. But with the life McGuane has lived—all the wisdom accrued and lessons of life, literature, and sport learned—it would seem just another step in the process to share these experiences.

McGuane doubts this will ever happen. A private person, McGuane finds the general contentiousness and trying-to-set-the-record-straight inherent in memoirs today a turnoff. Fans will have to be satisfied with his fiction and his periodic sporting journalism, and hope that the vigorous life he lives won't keep them waiting too long for the next book. Other than that, they can always pick up a fly rod and try to run into him in a trout stream. 