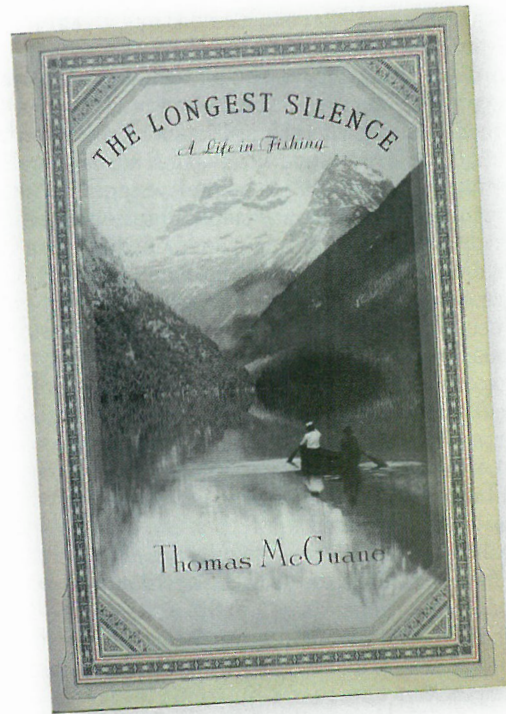


Talking with Thomas McGuane



The Longest Silence, a fly fishing classic, first published in 2001.

Henry Hughes

A literary and angling legend, Thomas McGuane was born in Michigan and has lived in southwest Montana for fifty years. He is the author of several acclaimed novels and screenplays, as well as ten collections of short fiction and non-fiction, including what many consider the best American book of essays on fly fishing: *The Longest Silence: A Life in Fishing*. I visited McGuane on a sunny Sunday afternoon in early September at his ranch above the West Boulder River. Our conversation covered a range of subjects, including the changing culture of fly fishing and how aging affects a person's perspective on angling and fish conservation.

HH: I think we both believe that fishing can cross lines of race, gender, age, and social class—but why does fly fishing still seem to carry an elite status?

TM: I saw a bumper sticker up near Lewiston that gave me an idea about these tensions. It read: "I Don't Care if You Do Fly Fish." [Laughter] My father and grandfather, who taught me to fish, were unselfconscious about angling. My father grew up in a family of railroaders. It was not an elite culture.

HH: So the bumper sticker suggests that some fly fisherman are self-aggrandizing—and that annoys people. Their choice in angling becomes a badge of refinement, the elite outdoorsman.

TM: It's tiresome. But opposite reaction is to act thuggish and redneck. *All we do is load up a bunch of beer and kick fin. Catch and fillet.*

HH: No, I don't want that either. Just a reasonable approach to the sport of angling.

TM: Right.

HH: Do you feel that fly fishing is going in a direction that's good or bad? Does it matter?

TM: Well, John Baily—from Baily's Fly Shop in Livingston—was here the other day with some data on the demographics of fly fishing. The baby boomers, they're big fly fishermen. But there's a steep drop off to the millennials. It's like a third of the whole fishing population vanishes.

HH: Richard Louv describes this in *Last Child in the Woods*. Kids aren't into the deep nature experience.

TM: Well, they need to be more adrenalized. Even in my own family, my kids are all skiing or riding motorcycles. Then again, they grew up with trout rivers in every direction, so maybe it didn't have the romance it had for me where a trout river

was a magical thing. I remember riding the train from Michigan to my grandmother's house in Massachusetts with my lips pressed against the window. Seeing those streams under the trestles—Oh, man, I gotta get off this train and go trout fishing.

HH: How often do you fish?

TM: Almost every day. I mix it up with bird hunting starting about now, when the rattlesnakes are gone. I don't fish much in the winter unless I'm down South somewhere, Florida or Alabama. I'm going to Louisiana later this month to fish for redfish.

HH: I know you love the rainbows and browns in your river.

TM: Yes, I've gotten to feel passionate about the trout here in my basin. I love to catch them, look at them, and see how they did that winter. I hold one in the net, "Well, you did fine." I care about the fish in a different way. I think this is an age-related factor. You get more interested in how the fish did, how they're doing. And I was trying to figure out my rage against barbs. Why are all the flies at a modern fly shop barbed?

HH: No need for it, really.

TM: Not only is there no need for it, but you really can't get rid of the barb.

HH: Squeeze them down?

TM: It's not good enough. You're still ripping mouths. You're being cruel.

HH: Ted Leeson tied up a bunch of flies for our trip to Montana and they're all barbless. Those are the only hooks he uses.

TM: Good. You can't buy them easily. It's ridiculous. And there's been catch and release forever.

HH: We were just in Yellowstone where there's a lot of talk

about eradicating invasive lake trout and brook trout. How do you feel about that?

TM: Yellowstone is good place to restore native species. But some of that is quixotry. For example, they want to get rid of the brown trout in Mission Creek. Just down here there was a guy who had a big spring-fed pond and he stocked it with Kamloops rainbow. The water source was basically an irrigation ditch out of the West Boulder River, and in the years I've been here, little brown trout came up that irrigation ditch and ate all the Kamloops. They grew up, got big and ate 'em! [Laughter] So what are you gonna do?

HH: [Laughter] Fish do what they want to do.

TM: Yeah. So they want to poison Mission Creek and get rid of brown trout.

HH: Seems kind of crazy

TM: It really is.

HH: I like your rational approach to conservation. You take a moderate position.

TM: It's hard to take a fish like westslope cutthroat that are inherently gullible and expect them to survive the pressures of ordinary fishing. If you're going to do that, then turn it into an aquarium. Poison the invaders, lock the thing up, and don't let anyone in there. But those native cutts are not going to be the basis of a recreational fishery. We are past the point in history where we can fully restore all native fish. And if you're not willing to face the politics of that, then stop killing the ones that found their way into the river.

HH: Do you think this relates to human life? Is that a silly analogy to make?

TM: Only in the sense that the planet would be much better off if humans would self-exterminate. [Laughter] In Faulkner's 1950 Nobel Prize speech, he said man will not only survive, he will prevail. I think it's one of the most depressing things I've ever heard. We've just squeezed everything out of the planet. When does our sense of fairness pursue the idea that we're such a good thing? The vast weight of the planet's biota is insects, anyway.

HH: Even though you know this and face this, you maintain a sense of optimism.

TM: I wonder if I do. I'm not sure I'm so optimistic.

HH: During your interview for Montana State's Angling Oral History Project, you made a funny comment about the book, *An Entirely Synthetic Fish*—the book that sharply criticizes the stocking of rainbow trout. You playfully accused the author of being an “academic spoilsport trying ruin our fun.” I appreciate what you said. Stocked rainbows are here to stay in many of our waters.

TM: The job of a certain type of academic is to be a killjoy. The criticism annoyed me. What about brown trout that have been propagated all over the world? Even my friend, Patty Limerick at The Center of the American West, at one point asked, “Is there anything more pompous than a white conservationist?” Maybe not, but that's also not a good reason to clear them all out and make room for the alt-right and people who care nothing about fish.

HH: Again, we need a balanced approach. When I see an old man catching stocked rainbows with his grandson, I know

there's value in that kind of fishery. Fishing as a way of keeping the human spirit alive is a theme in a lot of your writing. I recently taught your novel, *Nothing But Blue Skies*. The students and I had some great discussions.

TM: I would've loved to have heard them.

HH: The main character, Frank, is passionate about fly fishing for trout. One of the most powerful scenes in the book is when Frank takes his daughter, Holly, fishing. They have a strained relationship, but they connect over fly fishing. Those are transcendent moments of bonding. You wrote that book twenty-five years ago. Do you still feel that way?

TM: I think I do. I was just fishing yesterday on this river. It's greased cannonball water. I'm very careful wading. I've broken so many things in my leg—three surgeries in three years on the same leg.

HH: From horses?

TM: No, fishing! So I was going across this stretch of the river, picking my way along, and I thought, *Was it five minutes ago or thirty years ago that I remember packing my youngest daughter, Annie, on my shoulders, tip-toeing over the boulders*. It's so beyond what I could possibly do now. And it became a measure of time. Anyone who has fished their whole life knows these markers.

HH: Did you fish with Annie the way Frank fishes with Holly?

TM: A little bit. They all got started fishing, but none of them stayed with it. I have a granddaughter, Maisie, who is electrified by fishing.

Thomas McGuane talks with Henry Hughes over his tying desk.



HH: You've said that great writing can get a person into fishing. What are, in your opinion, some of the best fishing books?

TM: *Blood Knots* by the British writer, Luke Jennings. That's a great book. I also like many of those older classic English fishing books, like H.R. Jukes' *A Loved River*. The English fishing books—and your Oregon friend, Ted Leeson, invades this territory in a very positive way—the English fishing books are less about the technical aspects and more about the experience of fishing, which appeals to me. My old friend, Lefty Kreh, used to say, “Well, there's only technical writing and all the rest is fancy writing.” [Laughter]

HH: [Laughter] I like some of that fancy writing.

TM: I do, too. I like Harry Middleton's *The Earth is Enough*. There's Charles K. Fox, A. K. Best, Nick Lyons. I love the relaxed American voice of John Gierach. He reminds me of my late old friend, Charley Waterman, who wrote—mostly about hunting—like a guy you know. It's hard to write in a natural way, as if you were just talking to someone you knew quite well.

HH: Do you like fishing with other writers?

TM: I haven't done much of it. I almost always fish by myself, though I'm getting to the age where it's not a great idea. I've steelhead fished by myself in British Columbia on these nasty rivers where you could be swept away and no one would ever know. But now I want to live on forever. So I like to have someone around.

HH: Take care of yourself, Tom. We're all in favor of that.

TM: I just wrote a piece called, “Shrink to Fit: Fly Fishing While Old.” [Laughter] I contacted a lot of old anglers who are friends of mine. I missed Nat Reed—he was 84, fishing in Quebec, hooked a salmon, slipped and hit his head. He died shortly after.

HH: I'm sorry. But if you're a fisherman, that might be the way to go.

TM: Nat was a great environmentalist. Well, I got some excellent comments from aging anglers. John McPhee wrote me a dandy. John Gierach and Tom Brokaw wrote me good ones. Nick Lyons wrote me a piece, but it was a sad one. His wife just died. And his son just died.

HH: It's very sad. Yes, I knew his son, Paul. We traveled together.

TM: It's a terrible loss. So you can see I'm interested in what happens when we get older. When it comes to fishing, I think, in some ways, I'm as keen as ever. I don't know whether or not I'm competitive anymore, because I don't fish with other people. In the past I didn't like getting out-fished.

HH: In the introduction to *The Longest Silence* you write against competition, lamenting how a beautiful trout becomes a number, “the winning run in the one fly contest.”

TM: It's not good for the experience, but we give into it.

HH: Let me quote from the introduction to *Longest Silence*: “But if you can find no higher ideal than outfishing your buddies, catching something big enough to stuff or winning a trophy, you have a lot of work to do before you are what Izaak Walton would call an angler.”

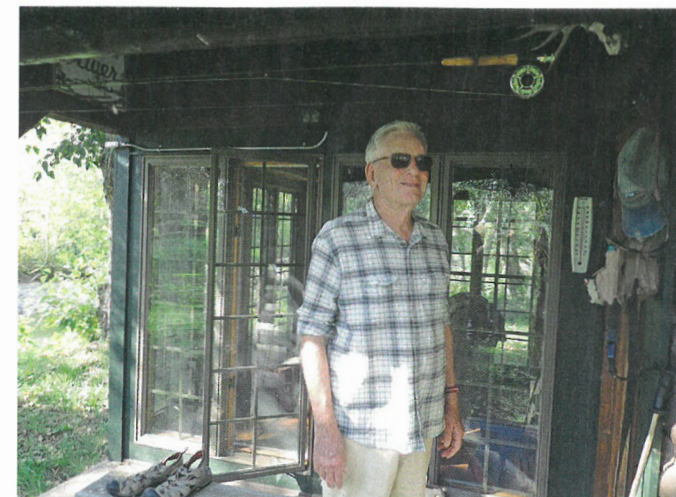
TM: Right. [Laughter] But there's a funny thing that happens, especially when Yvon Chouinard and I are fishing together. He's very competitive and he brings that out in me. Maybe I am already. He's a very good fisherman, prepared to do whatever it takes to catch a fish. If I wanted to fish dry line steelhead and catch maybe one fish in a long hard day, it would be hard to fish with Yvon using a T-14 sink tip that's really working.

HH: Absolutely.

TM: I feel that pressure.

HH: So, Yvon is not a purist?

TM: “Fish the water,” he says.



At 78, McGuane still writes, fishes and hunts almost every day that the seasons allow.

HH: And he is great a proponent for tenkara and simplicity in fishing. So he has many aspects to his fishing philosophy.

TM: Yes. I just fished with him on the New Fork of the Green River. He was always a little patronizing about dry fly fishing. But he had a great day, and he was very excited by the fact that he fished nothing but dries all day.

HH: It's never too late to evolve.

TM: Don't forget, he is a short, bald guy—those guys are always competitive. [Laughter] He is also the most pessimistic person, and yet the most fun to fish with. He thinks it's overshoot time on climate change. He feels we're doomed, the planet's doomed. But while he's out there he's wonderful fun to do stuff with.

HH: Does he like to laugh?

TM: He's very humorous, very funny.

[McGuane's dog, Tessie, a black Labrador adopted from England, comes over]

Talking about the idea of getting older and still being as keen. This little black dog—Tessie—feels about the same way as I do about fishing. She never takes her eye off the fly. For some reason, all the scatteredness in my life or her life just goes away when we're fishing. Focus is so hard in life. I'm ADD, anyway. To find some part of your life where it's really easy to concentrate on what you're doing—that's a blessing. A true self-inventory would reveal how few things in your life allow you to feel that concentration, that lack of interference from flak on the sides.

HH: Fishing does that?

TM: Fishing does that. Bird hunting really does that for me.

HH: How are hunting and fishing connected for you?

TM: The Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, said “hunting and fishing are identical.”

HH: I think they're very similar.

TM: Let's say you go to a small steelhead river you haven't fished before. You get down there and it's walking speed current over immersed boulders.

HH: Maybe a blue-green color.

TM: Yeah. You walk down through the cedars and you look at it going by and you know it's fishy. All your broad focus of gear prep, driving, using your GPS, all of a sudden it goes down like this. [McGuane holds his hands close together]. And there it is. And you *know* there's gonna be fish there. That's atavism, where your predatory self begins to immerge.

HH: I need that *self*.

TM: Yes, I think that predatory side of humanity is inescapable. It could be put to better use than it has been. But, as you know, if fishing is your tool for self-understanding, then it's important, you don't want to give it up.