



The Cadence of Grass

Thomas McGuane

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Sunny Jim Whitelaw, a descendent of pioneers and owner of a large bottling plant, may have died, but he has no intention of relinquishing control: his will specifies that no one gets a cent unless his daughter Evelyn reconciles with her estranged husband, Paul. But Evelyn is a strong-willed woman, fiercely attached to the land, whose horses transport her to a West she feels is disappearing, while Paul is a suave manipulator, without scruples, intent on living well.

As played out on the majestic stage of Montana cattle country, the ensuing drama involves blood, money, sex, vengeance, and a cross-dressing rancher. **The Cadence of Grass** is renewed evidence that McGuane is one of the finest writers we have, capable of simultaneously burnishing and demolishing the mythology of the West while doing rope tricks with the English language.

The Cadence of Grass Details

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From Reader Review The Cadence of Grass for online ebook

Gabe says

This novel was published in 2002, 10 years after McGuane's previous novel (he published two nonfiction books in the interim), and the break seemed to be at least partly spent on reconstructing his style--as a result, "The Cadence of Grass" is significant for a few reasons. The two most important:

1. It's the beginning (or at least the full realization) of "late McGuane"
2. It's the only McGuane novel with a female protagonist

The two points are related, but let's look at them separately.

1. McGuane's early novels ("Ninety-Two in the Shade," "The Bushwhacked Piano") are marked by their zaniness (seriously, "Panama," his fourth novel, has a cocaine mirror on the cover). His stories are more picaresque and shaggy dog-ish; often, what you're left taking away from these books is the total loneliness at their core. And that's not to disparage them; McGuane is the best writer of loneliness I've ever read. But his later books, starting with this one, "The Cadence of Grass," take on a new weight. They substitute a percentage of the zaniness for something more profound. McGuane has pretty much perfected this mixture by "The Cadence of Grass," it's a formula he'll continue to employ in his subsequent books, reaching perfection in 2015's "Crow Fair," in my opinion his best book.

Here, in "The Cadence of Grass," McGuane's late style takes the form of a huge cast, instead of the single machismo protagonist we get in early McGuane. In this book, we get close third on ten or so characters, but you can call six of them "main characters" (Evelyn, Natalie, Paul, Stuart, Mrs. Whitlaw, Bill). And while there are goofy/zany bits, their payoff isn't just a dead end, it isn't just a punchline that justifies their existence--they all feel tied to the progression of the story. For example, when Paul wakes up without a kidney, it's not just a shaggy dog bit--it fatefully ties Paul to the person whom he unwittingly gave the kidney to. Another example: when Evelyn wakes up in the strange Norwegian house after being stuck in the snowstorm, which culminates in her volunteering to cremate the grandfather's frozen corpse, it leads not just to the body being burned, it leads to a memory of her dead father, and Evelyn standing out in the snow having just lit the match, this knockout paragraph of desolation:

After a while, she gathered herself and saw, in one lighted window, Esther, cradling a steel bowl, whisking a meringue with terrific energy; in another, Torvald was watching television with his fingers in his ears. On the second floor, a window was flung open almost at the level of the flames, and psychedelic music filled the air; Donald leaned out, his hands on the sill, and shouted, "Captain Beefheart! I love Captain Beefheart!"

2. While there are a number of main characters in "The Cadence of Grass," it's clearly Evelyn's story. It even seems as if McGuane wrote this book partly in response to the criticism that had followed him throughout his career, that he/his books were chauvinist, his characters were just strutting, preening macho men and his women were the bystanders who just stood by while they wreaked their chaos. McGuane totally subverts this claim in "The Cadence of Grass"--the novel starts with a lot of close third on Paul, a pretty near approximation of a traditional McGuane protagonist (he sleeps with everyone, he's blustery, he's a screw-up).

But pretty quickly, it's apparent Paul is the antagonist in this story and his estranged wife, Evelyn, is the protagonist. Evelyn is sharp, is realistically flawed in all the ways you want a main character to be, and is one of McGuane's best characters.

The ending of this book, which puts Bill in a showdown with Paul, not only puts the nail in the coffin on the one-dimensional machismo character, but is one of the most memorable endings in anything I've ever read. McGuane's stakes are just on a higher level than most of the rest of literature--characters can die, do die, and often for nothing more than their morals or their word (see "Ninety-Two in the Shade"). When McGuane switches from close third to first person in the last five pages, he hits a rarefied storytelling plane that perhaps only a few other writers per generation are capable of reaching.

Blaire says

I didn't care for this one. I'd have to describe the writing style as angular. It's more a man's book, I think, than a woman's. The sentence structure is often awkward as are the changes in scene. The writing shines occasionally when describing the weather and landscape, for which the author clearly has great affection. I found the characters to be shallowly drawn. The dialog didn't ring true to my ear, and was at times incomprehensible. Great title, though.

Sally Rogers says

I was really bored with the character development. I skipped the middle, went straight to the end and didn't miss much. I was excited to read this book; his contemporaries, Jim Harrison and Wallace Stegner are more thoughtful and deep in their novels. Maybe McGuane's earlier work would have been a better choice for me.

A.J. says

For anyone with a solid familiarity with Thomas McGuane's work, this is a fascinating novel.

Here you have a novel with a female protagonist, written by a man who has often been written off as a male chauvinist pig, whose female characters have always been a major bone of contention with critics. You have a novelist who has continually been accused of rewriting autobiography, writing a novel that clearly has little to do with his own life. And you have the recognizable "McGuane protagonist" -- a man with a tendency to take things too far -- this time cast as anything but sympathetic.

It's almost as if *The Cadence of Grass* is a conscious attempt on McGuane's part to repudiate his critics. To say, in essence, no, you half-wits, this is what I've been trying to say.

Regarding the one-dimensional women of his early novels, McGuane has pointed to a masculine culture that regards women as unfathomable mysteries; how are his male protagonists to view them as fully realized human beings in this context? Despite the reputation he earned in the 1970s, McGuane is not, in fact, a "male chauvinist pig novelist," and in the (nonetheless tomboyish) character of Evelyn he seems determined to shake off that criticism once and for all.

Having repeatedly spoken in interviews about the struggle to write people who are not in any way like himself, McGuane has stepped far outside himself here. He has broken with his conventional close third-person, protagonist-centered viewpoint, using an omniscient narrator for the first time since 92 in the Shade. The result, for a reader familiar with his work, is to force one not only to consider this novel but to reconsider the whole. Have I been making assumptions about his characters, one asks, that have been getting in my way as I read?

McGuane's language is less electrifying here than in his early work, but on the other hand he has achieved his oft-stated goal of not allowing the words to get in the way of what he's trying to say. And there is no doubt that he remains a superb writer; the scenes in this novel that deal with horsemanship are surely examples of his finest prose.

Without a doubt, The Cadence of Grass marks the high point in McGuane's development as a novelist. It may not be his finest novel, but it is certainly his most mature. This is not the best introduction to McGuane for a new reader (go, instead, with 92 in the Shade or Nothing but Blue Skies), but for anyone who has read him extensively, it is possibly his most interesting novel.

Connor says

A pretty well written book with some great colloquialisms, but the characters aren't particularly believable. Most of them are intentionally shitty people who are apparently only written about for the reader to get a thrill when they get their comeuppance.

Chris says

If this book were made into a movie I would envision it as a combination of the TV shows "Dallas" and "Soap." It's about a rich dysfunctional family in Montana with the friction between the nouveaux riche and the cowboy/settler culture. I think if McGuane were to do an update of this family he would have written them into a reality show like Duck Dynasty or the Kardashians. It's witty, humorous, and with deep profound musing on the paths you take in life. This book reminded me a lot of the satirical masterpieces Evelyn Waugh wrote about the English upper class. McGuane even has a character named Evelyn-a woman. The ending is very dark though.

J says

Una scrittura rodata da anni di mestiere ma ancora affilata, un romanzo che trova nei particolari, nelle descrizioni e soprattutto nei personaggi una forza inaudita, una tridimensionalità più unica che rara. Thomas McGuane, classe '39, è un narratore di razza. Il canto dell'erba (Alet, pp. 224 - € 16) - tradotto armonicamente da Simona Sollai - con poche, rapide pennellate mette in scena le vicende della famiglia Whitelaw, una piccola dinastia di imprenditori del Montana su cui grava lo spirito del fu patriarca Sunny Jim che anche dall'oltretomba detta legge grazie a un testamento blindato, che lega indissolubilmente il suo patrimonio alla figura losca e meschina dell'ex genero Paul Crusoe, costringendo così l'intera famiglia a venire a patti con lui. Sullo sfondo, a fare da controcanto, il West con tanto di cowboy e natura incontaminata: un mito polveroso, divorato proprio da personaggi come Paul, ma che in qualche modo entra

sempre in scena per sparigliare le carte dei protagonisti, come quando Evelyn si perde nella neve in seguito a una “notte brava” con indosso un vestito da sera degno di un cocktail party a Manhattan o cerca consiglio e rifugio nel ranch dove è cresciuta sotto l’ala prorettrice, e un po’ burbera, del vecchio Bill, che da sempre veglia sui Whitelaw: unica vera figura paterna che McGuane lega proprio al “concetto” di West. Un concetto che l’autore conosce in prima persona vivendo in un ranch a sua volta. In un’intervista rilasciata a Robert Birnbaum di Identitytheory, parlando del titolo del suo libro, lo scrittore del Michigan sottolinea con forza come le vicende umane, anche quelle più abiette, debbano fare i conti con qualcosa di più grande e impassibile come il canto dell’erba: “[...] Sei certo che alla terra non importa un bel nulla se tu resti o te ne vai... E poi, ti prende questa impressione di essere in balia della natura. E la cosa inizia a piacerti. Ti piace la sensazione di vivere all’interno di un ciclo che è più importante di te; e che ha una specie di qualità ritmica, eterna che è rassicurante. È un po’ a questo che si riferisce il titolo.”

La stessa sensazione che provano i protagonisti del libro alle prese con la trama e che prova il lettore che si immerge in questo libro. All’inizio ci si trova in balia della narrazione di McGuane, per poi entrare nel meccanismo delle sue parole, il cui ritmo, tra ironia e dramma, inizia a piacere, a diventare familiare. “Il canto dell’erba” entra in circolo lento ma inesorabile. Un classico romanzo americano d’altri tempi, come non se ne vedevano dai tempi di Updike e Faulkner; senza effetti speciali, senza epica o manifesto spessore politico-sociale, eppure dotato di una potenza evocativa straordinaria, quasi metafisica, nascosta nei dettagli e per questo subliminalmente efficace.

Amanda Patterson says

He was known in life as the man who never smiled and in death he manages to control his family with his dubious legacy. He leaves his widow a comfortable income but insists that his ex-convict son-in-law, Paul, manage the bottling plant. As if this isn’t bad enough, Paul and Sunny’s daughter, Evelyn, must reconcile. This novel twists and turns through the hills of Montana as it meanders through the dysfunctional Whitelaw family. The story follows the lives of Jim’s wife, daughters, their husbands and Bill Champion in the months that follow his death.

The novel conveys serious messages about the passage of time and lost values. I enjoyed the offbeat characters. They do do the unexpected and I loved that in a world where so much is lost in the name of doing the right thing.

I have not read any of McGuane’s previous novels, several of which are considered modern classics. I will now.

Paul says

Ack, fantastic. The only issue here is that it wasn’t longer. McGuane moves along at breakneck speed, flitting from scene to scene where there was plenty of room to linger. Sure, things get a bit madcap here and there, but he pulls it off—this thing is laugh-out-loud hilarious at times. Also heartbreaking. Really excited to read more McGuane. There were a few passages where a main character hung out with her horses for a bit too long, and I wasn’t sure really what was gained there, but otherwise, a total joy to read. Just wish this 240 pager were like 350 or so. Fantastic characters, great writing but no BS, no lengthy descriptions of the landscape yet it’s still supremely present, a nice shade of Jim Harrison, with whom the author is good buds. Loved this book. The end(ing)?!

Martha says

This is my only McGuane book and I am thinking that is a good thing. A most negative review complained that he had not grown up as a writer with this novel - many years out from his last. But I know nothing about that. He is new to me and I loved most of it. This family stands as an example of my own father's succinct appraisal of humanity :" People are crazy." McGuane's crazy is funny and I laughed but the humor gets tricky and the story loses some points. It is at its best when MaGuane talks ranching and Montana - showing this country's big Western heart that, I suspect, the humor is supposed to make skip a beat. Two characters rise a bit above the fray - a woman who grew up loving horses and an aging cowboy who knows what's what. I'll take them and the big night sky and remember it as a paean to the West whether MaGuane likes it or not.

Sarah Pascarella says

Thanks to my uncle's recommendation, I've now found another envy-inspiring writer with Thomas McGuane. This is no easy read, though--the family is more despicable than The Corrections' Lamberts, the humor is as black as tar, and much of the violence comes as a sudden shock. But man can McGuane write--he's a master of economy, wit, and detail, and I'm in awe of how he can create a fully realized cast of characters in just a page or two.

Autumn says

The 4 stars is for the last 30 pages of the book; the words just about leap off the page, and the last 5 pages are electrifying, cathartic, inevitable, mystic, and horrible. I liked the language of the book a lot; the plot and most of the characters seemed secondary. Almost a horror novel in parts. I haven't read much else McGuane, but I will.

Andrew Thompson says

Hmm, quite a good read, but bits of it I just skipped over. The ending is quite weird, almost mystical. I felt the author could have made more of the characters. The story jumps around for no apparent reason, making the narrative feel uncomfortably jerky. Apparently, it isn't his best book. I bought it ages ago after reading a review. Interestingly, a couple of other books I read on the recommendation of the same magazine were not that great either. I think I have learnt my lesson now.

Kai says

Una scrittura rodata da anni di mestiere ma ancora affilata, un romanzo che trova nei particolari, nelle

descrizioni e soprattutto nei personaggi una forza inaudita, una tridimensionalità più unica che rara. Thomas McGuane, classe '39, è un narratore di razza . Il canto dell'erba (Alet, pp. 224 - € 16) - tradotto armonicamente da Simona Sollai - con poche, rapide pennellate mette in scena le vicende della famiglia Whitelaw, una piccola dinastia di imprenditori del Montana su cui grava lo spirito del fu patriarca Sunny Jim che anche dall'oltretomba detta legge grazie a un testamento blindato, che lega indissolubilmente il suo patrimonio alla figura losca e meschina dell'ex genero Paul Crusoe, costringendo così l'intera famiglia a venire a patti con lui. Sullo sfondo, a fare da controcanto, il West con tanto di cowboy e natura incontaminata: un mito polveroso, divorato proprio da personaggi come Paul, ma che in qualche modo entra sempre in scena per sparigliare le carte dei protagonisti, come quando Evelyn si perde nella neve in seguito a una "notte brava" con indosso un vestito da sera degno di un cocktail party a Manhattan o cerca consiglio e rifugio nel ranch dove è cresciuta sotto l'ala prorettrice, e un po' burbera, del vecchio Bill, che da sempre veglia sui Whitelaw: unica vera figura paterna che McGuane lega proprio al "concetto" di West. Un concetto che l'autore conosce in prima persona vivendo in un ranch a sua volta. In un'intervista rilasciata a Robert Birnbaum di Identitytheory, parlando del titolo del suo libro, lo scrittore del Michigan sottolinea con forza come le vicende umane, anche quelle più abiette, debbano fare i conti con qualcosa di più grande e impassibile come il canto dell'erba: "[...] Sei certo che alla terra non importa un bel nulla se tu resti o te ne vai... E poi, ti prende questa impressione di essere in balia della natura. E la cosa inizia a piacerti. Ti piace la sensazione di vivere all'interno di un ciclo che è più importante di te; e che ha una specie di qualità ritmica, eterna che è rassicurante. È un po' a questo che si riferisce il titolo."

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John says

I always like Thomas McGuane. He tells the same story a lot, but its a good story. The Montana scenery in this was fun but none of the characters drew me in. I started out reading his fiction but I like his non-fiction more these days. "Some Horses" is especially good.

Rollin says

My first read of McGuane. Liked it a lot. Interesting cast of characters, good story, enjoyable writing style, with hard Montana ranch life as a backdrop.

Sounds like a lukewarm review. Why did I give it four stars? I loved the words, the humorously flawed but still (mostly) sympathetic characters, the crazy dysfunctional family and family business, and the incredibly detailed passages about horses and cows real close up. And a story with twists and turns that surprise sometimes. Oh, and a male author writing story whose central character is a strong female.

Maybe If this hadn't been the first book of McGuane's that I read, I might have given him 3 stars for first rate, but this is the honeymoon of discovering a new writer so 4 it is.

Jeffrey says

Good story. The ending was dark and rather odd. Crazy set of characters. However, the cross dressing cowboy was a bit of a stretch and didn't lend much to an otherwise exceptional story about a batshit crazy family. McGuane writes beautifully of horses and horsemanship.

Laurie Gary says

Quite possibly a yawner. I'm on p.22 and I'm not quite sure yet what to think of it. My plan this summer is to stop reading any book I'm not enjoying, so stay we'll see.

Update: I returned it today. That felt good. I'm moving on :)

Christa says

I read a short story of his awhile back, "Dogs", that I really liked and I've picked up a few of his longer pieces. This was mixed as well. Really fucking funny in some parts and a bit ragged in others, but overall it was decent. The guy has a mean sense of humor.

Mad says

Loved this right up until the very end which seemed over the top. But McGuane's writing: wonderful characters, wonderful descriptions of Montana nature, both wild and human, make almost anything forgivable
