

(S4,E6) Catchin' Greenlights with Matthew McConaughey

Hi friends! I am on Goodreads. I don't know how many of you actually use Goodreads. Mostly, I use it to set reading goals, not meet them, feel bad about not meeting them, and then set a higher reading goal for the next year to prove to myself that I do in fact read. Rinse and repeat forever. But there is a social element to it where you can get notifications about what your friends are reading. I don't have many people on there, but I do have my good friend Min.

Min will probably inspire an episode of this podcast one day, because she almost exclusively reads the most insane romance novels known to man. I would say about 70% of our text conversations are her sending me a screenshot of an extensive description of a dick at 6am with a "good morning", and me going "OH NO" in all caps.

So, Min text me the other day and was like "...the McConaughey biography..." And I had a brief moment of panic, believing that I was being observed. I replied "...for the podcast?" As it turns out, Min had gotten the notification that I had finished actor Matthew McConaughey's autobiography, assumed I was having some sort of breakdown and just wanted to check in. That's friendship. And I'm one book closer to meeting my reading goal.

I'm Alex. This is Pop Culture Boner – the podcast edition. And today, I'm thinking about Greenlights by Matthew McConaughey.

Ok so way back in the second season of this podcast, I did an episode on Matthew McConaughey's career redemption – the McConaissance, if you will – where I kind of talked about why guys like him get to have Oscar-winning second career arcs as they age. I'll link it in the show notes if you're interested. When I was writing that episode, I was staying with my parents and I forced them to watch like 10 McConaughey movies with me – partially so they could periodically slap me awake.

Anyway, skip forward to Christmas 2021 and, having kept the memory of being forced to watch 2011's *The Lincoln Lawyer* for almost a full 12 months, my father proudly presented me with a copy of *Greenlights*, the fresh-off-the-presses autobiography of one Matthew David McConaughey. And even though it was an extremely thoughtful gift, which I loved, I did not read it. It sat on my shelf, gathering dust. Until now.

That's right! Almost 2 and a half years after its initial release, I read this whole book cover-to-cover in a single evening, for you – the people. Did you ask for it?

No. But much like the world receiving McConaughey's autobiography, you're getting it anyway. You're welcome! Let's get into it shall we?

Now, no one could ever accuse me of being timely – lord knows this podcast would probably be more successful if I actually timed it with current events – but I actually think a couple of years down the track is probably the perfect time to return to Greenlights. It was weirdly well-received, debuting at the top of the New York Times non-fiction best-seller list, and garnering mostly positive reviews. The release was a little buzzier than most run-of-the-mill celebrity autobiographies, I think because McConaughey is sort in that weird cache of pre-social media Hollywood so there's still a bit of mystery about him. People were maybe expecting a scandalous tell-all and were surprised when they got something that seemed like it was aiming for profundity instead. Plus there was the fact that McConaughey did a press tour full of additional ridiculous McConaughey-isms – in August 2020, for example, he announced that the book was coming by telling people that he'd sequestered himself in the desert for 52 days with no electricity in order to confront the diaries he had been keeping for 36 years.

I'm not judging this process – I personally prefer to drink 87 cups of coffee four hours before anything I have to write is due and then smash my keyboard like I'm angry at it, but to each their own. However, I do want to emphasise that the event he told this story at was marking the partnership between Calm, the mindfulness app that charges you \$400

a year for nature sounds and Lincoln, the car brand he's acted as ambassador for since 2014 (a full three years after The Lincoln Lawyer came out, by the way). Calm has stories narrated by Matthew McConaughey. That's the connection. But like... why would anyone want their meditation app and their car company to partner up? I'm on a deadline, so I obviously had to get to the bottom of this and apparently, it's happened because Lincoln's "commitment to wellness has never been stronger" and they want their drivers to "find sanctuary wherever they go". Which like... fine, but I would prefer that if you were driving a vehicle you were present on this plane of consciousness. Thank you.

We've well-and-truly digressed. Anyway. Another thing that's probably worth noting about Greenlights is that as it turns out, unlike many of his well-heeled brethren, Matthew McConaughey wrote it himself. There's no 'withs' or 'as told tos', and normally I would kind of go "hmm, ghostwritten" but given that whole thing is peppered with deeply questionable poetry I think that's unlikely. But let's start with the book itself.

The title Greenlights is inspired by McConaughey's personal philosophy, which is all about catching the greenlights presented to you by the universe and dodging or redirecting the yellow and red lights. The more greens you're catching, the more you're propelling yourself forward to your dreams. Life is a highway, etc., etc. Given that it's based on a traffic light system and there's only so many ways you can reword that without sounding patronising, I'll let Matthew describe it in more detail for you. I'm not

going to do a Southern accent, but just pretend:

"The problems we face today eventually turn into blessings in the rearview mirror of life. In time, yesterday's red light leads us to a greenlight. All destruction eventually leads to construction, all death eventually leads to birth, all pain eventually leads to pleasure. In this life or the next, what goes down will come up.

It's a matter of how we see the challenge in front of us and how we engage with it. Persist, pivot, or concede. It's up to us, our choice every time.

This is a book about how to catch more yeses in a world of nos and how to recognise when a no might actually be a yes. This is a book about catching greenlights and realizing that the yellows and reds eventually turn green. Greenlights. By design and on purpose. Good luck."

Now, if you, like me, hold a deep and abiding suspicion of the self-help genre, you may find this particular philosophy to be a tad grating, especially since it's opening the book. But don't worry – according to Matthew McConaughey while this is not a "traditional memoir" it's also not an "advice book" because he is not a preacher. Allegedly. He calls Greenlights an "approach book" because he's got a philosophy that can be objectively understood and then subjectively applied by you, the reader.

And if you're thinking, "An approach book sounds an awful lot like a so-called advice book, Matthew", honestly, you

and me both. But I think McConaughey's desire is to become the kind of author where, years down the line, people stumble upon Greenlights and find it to be a heartbreaking work of staggering genius that they refer to frequently as a kind of north star for their life. Tragically, I suspect that McConaughey would quite like to be a poet. It's a compulsion he's had since the much-mocked Lincoln commercials I mentioned earlier, where he drives around musing out loud to himself about what it means to drive a Lincoln. And in case you doubted how seriously he took those ads, page 8 of his book is dedicated to a handwritten reproduction of his commercial script: "Sometimes you gotta back to go forward. And I don't mean goin' back to reminisce or chase ghosts. I mean go back to see where you came from, where you been, how you got HERE."

Somewhat tellingly, a lot of the longer profile pieces that came out in conjunction with the reviews of Greenlights spent a lot of time talking to McConaughey about his philosophies and the fact that he's aiming to write something good enough and useful enough that it wouldn't matter if his name was on it. The New York Times did a really thorough profile where they interviewed people connected to the book. Apparently, his initial pitches were less story and more personal philosophy according to Gillian Blake, the senior vice president and editor in chief of Crown Publishing Group, who eventually picked up Greenlights.

The Times also interviewed Richard Linklater, who directed McConaughey in his first film, Dazed and Confused. Linklater noted that he thought the

compulsion to write came from a desire to communicate outside the demands of an acting gig: "Linklater explained that actors like McConaughey are vulnerable in their work: "They don't have total control," he said. "Even the most powerful actors — Denzel Washington, Daniel Day-Lewis — are still at the mercy of the parts they're being offered. Actors need these other outlets."

For McConaughey, that outlet seems to have been journaling. Design-wise this book actually looks pretty cool. It's interspersed with reproductions of journal pages in his handwriting, scrawled post-it notes, bumper stickers and photos. It makes a lot of sense for what he's trying to do. Somewhat frustratingly though, his handwriting is appalling and the actual reproductions from his diary are equal parts illegible and rambling. So, while I don't doubt that he wrote it I do think he has a good editor.

So, since we've established that it's definitely a memoir but that Matthew McConaughey would also like it to be some sort of manifesto, what does he actually believe? Great question, I would love to tell you. But I'm not entirely sure I can. See, McConaughey is a fine enough actor. I do not think he is a particularly smart actor, in the sense that I don't think he's incredible at understanding what makes a film script good. I think he picks things based on how they resonate with him, and sometimes that lines up with things that are amazing. But even when the films are bad his performances are always fine enough, and even bordering on charming. When I last spoke about McConaughey, I said I thought at least some of this was down

to a kind of roguish masculinity that he possesses which can be wrestled into rom-com charm, or left to run free into darker, more depressing realms. I think, having now read his book, I would like to re-evaluate that position slightly.

It is very difficult for me to emphasise, without reading you huge passages, how much reading this book is like being held hostage by a drunk man at a bar. Let me paint a picture for you. You know when you're on a night out, and your tablemate has gotten up to go to the loo or something, and when you look up from your phone you momentarily lock eyes with the guy who has been sinking beers alone the table over. And rather than acknowledge that this eye-locking was an accident of timing, he takes it as a sign from above that you two are destined to speak. So, he sidles over to your table, and starts talking. He's not so shitfaced he can't string a sentence together, and he's not totally terrible looking. But it becomes clear that this man has an Idea About The World that he is attempting to convey to you, and he's not got any intention of leaving, because he has found a captive audience. That is what this book is like. You have been backed into a corner by Matthew McConaughey sinking a couple of cold ones and he is determinedly imparting what he feels is a Profound Thought to you.

The thing that makes this bearable while reading Greenlights is that, rather than my initial assessment of a roguish masculinity, I would now say that I think Matthew McConaughey has a kind of charismatic mysticism about him. This quality is not unique to McConaughey — you can find it in anyone from salesmen

to actual preachers. It's the thing that makes Greenlights feel like a manifesto – it gives this weighty sensation to what's being said, so long as you don't think about it too hard. It's why the book has chapter titles like "the arrow doesn't seek the target; the target draws the arrow" or "the art of running downhill". It's why the whole book is littered with snippets of the aforementioned poetry - like "Time and truth. Two constants you can rely on. One shows up for the first time every time while the other never leaves." These things feel like they could mean something but really, they're a little light on substance.


They're also often used to cover some really casual brutality throughout the book. Maintaining his similarities to a drunk man in a bar, McConaughey has this really unsettling tendency of nonchalantly dropping horrifying tidbits from his life, and then breezing on over them as though the circular poetic thing he's saying is more important.

For example, in the introduction, he reveals that he was molested at 18 while he was unconscious in the back of a van. The next sentence is about doing peyote in Mexico with a mountain lion and then the next one is about getting stitches. From there he moves on to his circular wisdom for the chapter: "This is a story about getting relative with the inevitable. This is a story about greenlights." The assault is never mentioned again. Of course, I would never presume that he is obligated to share anything about this particular incident – these things are deeply personal. But it does beg the question: why include it at all?

I think it's in there because McConaughey is a self-identified optimist. A lot of big-ticket traumatic moments in his life are fascinatingly reformed into philosophical teachings. The first chapter – titled Outlaw Logic – is dedicated to explaining his family dynamic. His mother, Kay, and father, Jim, are twice divorced and thrice married. We're introduced to their relationship through an incident on a Wednesday night in 1974 where Jim gets home from work and Kay immediately picks a fight, breaks his nose and threatens to gut him with a kitchen knife. Jim continues to antagonise her until she bursts into tears and they end up fucking on the floor. This page is punctuated with a picture of Kay's mottled, now-88-year-old hand, with one crooked finger where "my dad broke Mum's middle finger to get it out of his face four separate times". This, he emphasises, is how his parents communicated their love to each other and is framed as a lesson in mutual understanding.

Other instances of extreme violence on his father's part are all written with a kind of admiration. A description of a beating Jim laid on one of his older brothers is punctuated by a bumper sticker that says "The best way to teach is the way that most understand." A particularly heartbreaking scene in which Jim beats a 16-year-old Matthew until he pisses himself, while Matthew's internal monologue replays the fact that his father is convinced that Matthew is not his son, is described as a lesson in not seizing the moment.

Obviously, traumatic incidents shape your world view – especially when you're a child – but in my experience, regular



people rarely feel compelled to reshape those incidents into a gospel they can preach from a pulpit. There's a fascinating lack of real reflection in McConaughey's relaying of these aspects of his life – he mentions that his relationship with his mother was strained for many years, but that it's fine now. He mentions that he likes to be constantly on the road, but only really to expound on the virtues of being on the move. He talks about several hard partying years, but only to say that they happened. It's like if he can go over them fast enough he can get back to what he's actually trying to deliver – a Message for the Masses so that they can take up his mantras.

The optimism feels oddly boot-strappy – like the reason he is able to get from Point A to Point B in his career so rapidly is actually because he was able to instantly understand what was being conveyed by the universe through these extreme traumas. And perhaps if we were similarly as tuned in, we could also follow the direction of our dreams. Fascinatingly, it seems to have worked. People really got caught up in the weird sayings, quirks of speech and insistence on describing his wet dreams in detail. Most reviews I looked at really only mentioned the violence in passing, and mostly accepted the telling of it as valuable lessons in eccentricity to guide your forward motion.

Anyway, obviously I would never begrudge the man his opportunity to tell his story the way he wants to. But I'm not a huge fan of the presentation here. It feels like it's teetering on the edge of something dangerous.

But mostly, it's probably a good reminder to us normal people that 52 days in a desert with no electricity and only your teenage diaries to keep you company will probably have you reinventing yourself as a pop cultural prophet. To steal a post-it-noted phrase from Matthew McConaughey himself: "There's a difference between art and self-expression. All art is self-expression. All self-expression is not art."

Welp – I have finally read *Greenlights*. I can rest easy knowing what some of the inside of McConaughey's brain looks like. I wish I knew less about his wet dreams but you can all be grateful that I edited out the 10 minutes I spent going "WHY, WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME THIS?" I am a podcasting saint. If you would like to tell me about your we-... NO. Absolutely not. If you would like to bring me a life-altering post-it note you stuck inside your journal as a 14-year-old, great call. My life does need changing. Talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub. Peace!



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