



Book Club Set

Greenwood

By Michael Christie

About the Author



Michael Christie is the author of the novel *If I Fall, If I Die*, which was longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, the Kirkus Prize, was selected as a New York Times Editors' Choice Pick, and was on numerous best-of 2015 lists. His linked collection of stories, *The Beggar's Garden*, was longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, shortlisted for the Writers' Trust Prize for Fiction, and won the Vancouver Book Award. His essays and book reviews have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Globe & Mail*.

Greenwood, his most recent novel, was longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. Rights have been sold in seven countries.

A former carpenter and homeless shelter worker, he lives with his two children in Victoria, British Columbia, the unceded territory of the Lkwungen speaking people, and the Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEC First Nations.

Retrieved from: <http://www.michaelchristie.net/>

About the Book

In 2038, scientist Jake Greenwood is working as an overqualified tour guide to ultra-rich eco-tourists in one of the world's last remaining forests. As the rest of humanity chokes on the dust storms that follow the environmental collapse known as the Great Withering, Jake finds temporary refuge on Greenwood Island, a place whose connection to her own family name she had thought just a coincidence -- until someone from her past reappears with a journal that might give Jake the family story she's long craved. As we move backward in time from the Great Withering to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and then forward into the future again, we meet an injured carpenter facing the possibility of his own death, an eco-warrior trying to atone for the sins of her father's rapacious timber empire, a blind tycoon with a secret he will pay a terrible price to protect, and a Depression-era drifter who saves an abandoned infant from certain death, only to find himself the subject of a country-wide manhunt. At the very center of the book is a tragedy that will bind the fates of two boys together, setting in motion events whose reverberations will be felt for over a century.

A magnificent novel of inheritance, sacrifice, nature, and love that takes its structure from the nested growth rings of a tree, Greenwood spans generations to tell the story of a family living and dying in the shadows cast by its own secrets. With this breathtaking feat of storytelling, Michael Christie masterfully reveals the tangled knot of lies, omissions, and half-truths that exists at the root of every family's origin story.

Discussion Questions



1. Greenwood is part of a new genre of novels known as CliFi (climate fiction). What makes it fall under that category? Do any of the novel's environmental themes resonate with you?
2. At its heart, Greenwood is a family saga. How did the boyhoods of brothers Everett and Harris make them into the men they became? How do you think Willow's nomadic life affected her son Liam? How did Jake's orphaning influence the person she became?
3. The Great Withering began with the trees—"the wave of fungal blights and insect infestations, to which old growth was particularly defenseless." What environmental stresses do you see in your life today? How do you personally address these issues?
4. "The best sacrifices, Willow knows, are always made in solitude, with not a camera in sight." Characters make many sacrifices in Greenwood—Everett for his brother during the war, Temple for the downtrodden, Feeney out of love for his principles. What other sacrifices did you notice in the novel? Which character's sacrifice moved you most and why?
5. How did you feel about Meena's reaction to Liam's painstakingly created gift, a homemade viola that replicated the Stradivarius Meena so loved? Were her actions necessary? Cruel? What did her reaction say about their relationship?
6. The word "roots" has many meanings in Greenwood—a tree's stability, a family's ancestry, a person's connection to a place. Which meaning resonated most with you and why?
7. "Time, Liam has learned, is not an arrow." Greenwood travels back and forth through time—deepening characters and their backstories, connecting characters in unforeseen ways, twisting the plot like roots. In fact, the book's timeline, starting and ending with the most recent years, and with the earliest events tucked into the middle, is structured like the rings of a tree. How did this structure affect your reading experience? How would the reading experience have changed if the story was told linearly?

8. Why do you think author Michael Christie chose to write the center section—1908—in the voice of a Greek chorus of townspeople? How does this perspective enhance our understanding of the Greenwood boys' upbringing?
9. Christie writes that nature has taught Temple “things she'd never speak in polite conversation. Like the fact that Mother Nature's true aim is to convert us people back into the dust we came from, just as quick as possible.” Like Temple, people tend to view Mother Nature as either the great destroyer (earthquakes, floods, the Dust Bowl), or the great nurturer (providing food, shelter, oxygen, and more). Which view did each character take? Which do you lean toward? Do you think both can be true? Why or why not?
10. What do you think of Jake's final actions at the end of the book? Did she make the right decisions? How would you have handled the revelations?

Author Interview



Tell us about your journey as a writer.

It was very unguided and long. I grew up in Thunder Bay, Ont., never knowing a writer, never really putting it together that you could be a writer. But I was a lover of literature, a lover of books. I had a house full of books. My mom was agoraphobic — she had an anxiety disorder and didn't leave the house for much of my childhood, which was tragic, but she also filled the house with books and art supplies, and that's what we did together.

At what point would you have described yourself as a writer?

Building 'writer' into my identity feels a little bit odd. The whole thing could fall apart at any moment and I'll be right back working a job, and I would be OK with that. Although, I must say I love writing more than anything I've ever done. It suits my character.

This is my fourth book and you think that you know what you're doing and you think that you know you may have amassed a certain amount of skill but you're right back in the terror of, 'Oh my goodness, maybe this book is not good.' Every time.

How did *Greenwood* come to be?

Characters. First I had some thoughts on particular individuals I was interested in, like a timber tycoon, a scientist who was interested in the communicative networks developed by trees, a drifter type character who finds a baby in a forest. So I had these murky and ill-defined ideas for people, but it wasn't until I was cutting down a tree on Galiano Island to clear space for a driveway. I'd cut it down, saw the stump, and realized that the tree was telling its own story within its structure and that the rings looked like pages. I thought, what an interesting way to structure this narrative that I'm working on. Three more years passed and I had a book.

The novel is largely about preservation and what we lose when we don't protect trees.

Absolutely it is for sure. And then there's also the family tree resonance there as well. This is a sort of larger metaphor for this family, the Greenwoods, but I think the book also presents an environmental message but it also presents the message that we are going to need to use some resources and so we have to learn and discover how to best do that.

I think it presents the case that trees are sentient beings because they are, and we're discovering more and more about that intelligence, if you want to call it that, every day. But at the same time, a character like Harris Greenwood who's responsible for millions of trees coming down on this land, I wanted to present him not as a villain either. It would be too easy to go and paint every logger as an enemy of the environment, but I think that real life is a lot more complicated than that.

How much of yourself is in this novel in terms of your own personal life journey?

At the time I was writing it, I truly believed that there was none. My second book is a pretty autobiographical novel, and I was kind of burned out by just how close it was to my own experience. And so I was like, this next book, I'm not gonna touch personal biographical detail.

Until after I finished it and my brother read it and was like, 'Oh, these two brothers are pretty interesting characters.' My DNA, I think, is woven into pretty much every character in this book. And that's really, that's how I operate as a writer. I really need to feel my way into a person and find common ground with them emotionally to access their consciousness.

When you're writing a character, how much do you have to become that character?

This book was particularly fun in that I had these distinct time periods that I was writing into, and there's five of them. I actually practiced this kind of method acting where I would sort of live in the time period as I was writing that time. The 1974 section, I was watching like the Woodstock documentary and listening to music at the time, reading novels set at the time just to really try to get a feel for the sort of mental environment. That part I love because I love to sort of nerd out on a particular time.

The book starts, I was going to say in the distant future, but I guess it's not so distant future. It's 2038. It jumps around decade to decade to decade — you're a time traveller. What was the mental capacity trying to write something like this?

I wrote the majority of the book in a small like 10'x10' cabin on Galiano Island and the walls of it were sort of just plastered with like timelines and like strings, you know, people would go in there and be like, 'Are you trying to catch a serial killer here?' It was very involved, to put it mildly, and it just took an enormous amount of writing one section

and then trying to make it jive with the other ones, then writing deeper and going back and fixing stuff. It was an incredibly complex juggling act to keep the narrative working. This is maybe where the terror comes from, but I had no idea what I was doing within the sections. Writing is a really weird mix of planning and purposeful intention, and then also just winging it on a scale that is enormous.

What kind of research went into this?

I did a ton of reading. For the 1934 section I got a hold of the Eaton's catalog for 1934 and just referenced it whenever I needed an object. Writing historical fiction is a very seductive process as well because you can really get buried in the details and you can get over-interested in your research.

When I first submitted the book to my agent, he said, "You need to turn the historical detail down by 50 per cent." I was like, 'Ouch. All my precious research.' So that was a difficult day. But I did it and it benefited.

I'm sure there are many who suffer, as I do, from eco anxiety. A UN report just came out this week, and it doesn't paint a great picture in terms of how well we're controlling carbon emissions right now. In the book you talk about something called the Withering. First of all, what's the Withering?

The Great Withering is an ecological disaster that takes place in the near future where the vast majority of the world's trees die off due to fungal infections, insect infestations or fires. It's something that I came up with, but I must tell you unfortunately, the American chestnut tree in the United States in the '30s was decimated by a fungus. The mountain pine beetle in B.C., flourished because of climate change and because of monoculture tree planting. But these things are already happening and I think the saddest trick that trees ever played on us was to appear so sturdy and almost immortal, when in fact they're very, very vulnerable to minute changes in their environments.

When I talk about having that eco anxiety, was this a manifestation of yours?

For sure. It's something that I've struggled with over time and writing about it was one way for me to sort of examine it. Reading so much about the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, reading the *Grapes of Wrath* again and realizing that that is a work of climate fiction where you have migrants who are fleeing unlivable conditions for the coast, for California, people are being turned away, I mean, it's a climate story. Writing the book did give me hope in the sense that when you look into the past, you see a lot of darkness, but you do get astounded by the way people banded together and

built community and relied on one another. It was kind of cathartic, I think, to write about it.

Let's talk a little bit more about the characters. I wanna talk about Jake. Why start it with someone like Jake?

Jake came pretty early in the process and I was just fascinated by this idea of someone who had so much skill and expertise in a particular area, but was stuck working in this absurd tree resort for the wealthy. Naomi Klein has called this climate barbarism and that is the idea that as the natural spaces of the world shrink and decline, they're going to become almost like luxury items for the wealthy, especially now that we know how beneficial nature is to the human being. I found that idea really chilling. Jake felt like a person of her time, particularly, you know, her being mired in student debt and stuck in a dead-end job. I felt like it was probably the fate of many to come.

Who were you writing this for? It wasn't just for Vancouver Islanders, was it?

No, I don't think so. I think there's a universal reverence for these spaces. I mean, anyone who's been to Cathedral Grove or anyone who's been hiking in some old growth in B.C. knows that feeling you get when you are in the presence of a gigantic tree. It's a religious feeling and it's a spiritual feeling. I wanted to convey that to the reader who may not even have much experience with it in the real world, but also try to conjure that wonder while also critiquing the economics of the situation too.

I think there was this long existing perception that oh, no one cares about Canada or we're sort of this, you know, less interesting cousin of America. But that's absolutely untrue. *Greenwood* is a bestseller in Germany, France and Italy. It's really odd for me to consider the fact that this story is so meaningful to folks who are not living here, but they are. It speaks to just the universality of the themes, I guess.

You've done some work at homeless shelters in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, and there are some themes around addiction in the book. Was that conscious or subconsciously added in there from your own experiences?

I mean a lot in retrospect and it's a story about nature, it's a story about trees, but it's also a story about family and generations and intergenerational relationships and the things that are passed between generations including trauma, addiction, property, lies, secrets, inheritances, all that stuff that I love to think about.

Just prior to the writing in this book and sort of during it, I lost both of my parents and had two children so it was a deeply difficult and wonderful time that really got me

thinking about generations and time and family in a way that I hadn't been compelled to before.

Certainly there are these strains that run through the Greenwood family like a predisposition to addiction, like some mental health concerns, lactose intolerance seems to be an issue for them, and so I love to kind of play with those themes as I was writing and try to paint a picture of this collection of people who share these struggles through time.

I can't imagine something as vulnerable as pouring yourself into a page, whether it's subconscious or not, and then releasing it into the world. What is that like?

It's surreal, for sure. It's nice, though, that I don't know what I'm doing when I'm doing it and that it's only apparent after. I have an older brother and he's like a business guy. He's very different than me. So injecting him into Harris Greenwood was a lot of fun. You're digging into your own emotions and your own psyche, but you're also just kind of having fun with your life and the sort of the things that you can imagine based on your life. I'm certainly proud of it. I definitely put in a hideous amount of work. If you calculated my per hour rate on this novel, I think it would be very, very depressing, and sub minimum wage for sure. But I'm proud of it.

You and the book had a moment when it was first released, but now with *Canada Reads* it has this whole second life. What's that like?

It's been a wonderful rebirth for the novel. It came out in 2019 originally, and in 2020 I was in Australia on a book tour and then had a multi-city tour planned for the U.S. This was spring of 2020 and we all know how that went and so the entire tour was cancelled, so the book had a bit of a stunted birth. It's been amazing to see *Canada Reads* inject life into it and help it find new readers and generate interest.

***Greenwood* is being adapted into a TV series. Are you part of that?**

It's being developed by a guy who made *Six Feet Under* and has worked on *Westworld*, used to work for HBO and so he's optioned it and I'm involved in the process. I'm going to be an executive producer on the show. It's going to be a limited series hopefully, and we've just found a writer to write it as well. So it seems to be moving forward.

What's that process like finding a writer to write about something that's been written and then knowing the author is going to be like breathing down your neck?

I mean we briefly entertained me writing it, but I sort of figured that writing 10 hours of prestige television probably wasn't the best way for me to learn how to write for television. But I'm going to be involved in the process. I hope it happens. I think it'll make a pretty compelling 10 hours of TV.

What do you want readers to take away from a novel like this?

A deeper appreciation of the natural world. I really love it when readers come up and say, 'I could smell the trees' or 'I could feel what it was like to sit beneath a Willow tree in Estevan, Sask.' Those moments for me are really, really gratifying as a writer. I hope a reader would take away just the sense of having experienced humanity to some degree and a deeper understanding of what makes a family, a deeper understanding of our interconnectedness with one another, I think that's a big theme of the novel. Just as trees communicate and depend on one another, I think we are all dependent on one another as well, and I think the solution to climate change is our collective effort. Hopefully the reader will be left with that as well.

What's next for you?

I just finished a new novel that's taken a long time to write and it's set on another fictional Gulf Island. It's the story of a woman and her daughter who go there on vacation and something happens and the young woman goes missing. The novel dives into the history of the place and the lives of the many reclusive and strange characters who inhabit this place and unearths the secret history of this island.

Retrieved from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/michael-christie-greenwood-vancouver-island-jason-d-souza-victoria-1.6787857>

Other Links and Resources



Other Interviews:

<https://creativewriting.ubc.ca/news/alum-interview-michael-christie/>

<https://www.cloudlakeliterary.ca/blogposts/in-conversation-with-michael-christie-author-of-greenwood>

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DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: