

The Green Mile

by Stephen King · Language: EN

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Overview

The Green Mile is a serialized novel by Stephen King, set in the death row block of Cold Mountain Penitentiary in 1932 Louisiana. The story is narrated by Paul Edgecombe, the block's head guard, who recounts his experiences with a gentle giant named John Coffey, a black man convicted of the rape and murder of two young white girls. Coffey possesses a mysterious healing power, which Paul and his fellow guards discover as they witness his extraordinary abilities. The novel explores themes of justice, racism, and the supernatural, as Paul grapples with the moral implications of executing an innocent man.

The narrative is framed by Paul's present-day reflections as an elderly man in a nursing home, looking back on the events that shaped his life. The story unfolds through a series of episodic chapters, originally published as six installments, each ending with a cliffhanger. As the guards come to believe in Coffey's innocence and his divine gift, they face an agonizing dilemma: whether to defy the system and save him or to follow the letter of the law. The novel culminates in a heartbreaking execution, leaving Paul with a profound sense of guilt and a supernatural longevity that forces him to live with the memory of his choices.

The Green Mile is a powerful meditation on the nature of good and evil, the fallibility of justice, and the possibility of redemption. It matters because it challenges readers to question the morality of capital punishment and the assumptions we make about guilt and innocence. King's masterful blend of horror, historical fiction, and human drama creates a deeply moving story that resonates long after the final page. The novel was adapted into an acclaimed 1999 film starring Tom Hanks, further cementing its place in popular culture.

Key Takeaways

- John Coffey's healing powers reveal the arbitrary nature of justice and the tragedy of executing an innocent man.
- The novel critiques racism and the death penalty by showing how prejudice can corrupt the legal system.
- Paul Edgecombe's guilt and supernatural longevity illustrate the lasting moral weight of complicity in wrongdoing.
- The Green Mile demonstrates that true goodness can exist in the most unlikely places, even among condemned prisoners and hardened guards.

- The story emphasizes the importance of empathy and seeing beyond a person's appearance or crime.
- King uses the supernatural as a lens to explore real-world issues, making the fantastical elements serve a deeper purpose.
- The serialized structure of the original publication mirrors the episodic nature of memory and storytelling.
- The novel suggests that redemption is possible, but it often comes at a great cost.

Chapter Summaries

Part One: The Two Dead Girls

Paul Edgecombe, an elderly man in a nursing home, begins to tell the story of his time as a guard on death row at Cold Mountain Penitentiary in 1932. He introduces the block, nicknamed the Green Mile for its green linoleum floor, and the inmates, including the newly arrived John Coffey, a massive black man convicted of murdering two young girls. Paul describes the initial shock of Coffey's size and his childlike demeanor, and the guards' unease as they prepare for his stay. The part ends with the arrival of a new prisoner, William Wharton, a violent and unpredictable man who will disrupt the block's routine.

Part Two: The Mouse on the Mile

The guards discover a mouse that has taken up residence on the Green Mile. The inmates, particularly Eduard Delacroix, become attached to the mouse, naming it Mr. Jingles. The mouse seems unusually intelligent and responsive, performing tricks for Delacroix. Meanwhile, John Coffey's gentle nature becomes more apparent as he interacts with the guards and the mouse. Paul begins to suspect that Coffey is not what he seems, especially after Coffey heals a urinary tract infection that Paul has been suffering from. The part ends with a violent confrontation between Wharton and the guards, revealing Wharton's dangerous instability.

Part Three: Coffey's Hands

Paul and the other guards become increasingly convinced of John Coffey's innocence and his supernatural abilities. Coffey's healing of Paul's infection is a turning point, and Paul begins to investigate the details of Coffey's crime. He discovers that the evidence against Coffey was circumstantial and that the real killer may still be at large. Meanwhile, the guards struggle with the ethical dilemma of executing a man they believe to be innocent. The part ends with a shocking revelation: Coffey's healing power is not limited to physical ailments, as he draws out the evil from others, leaving him exhausted and distressed.

Part Four: The Bad Death of Eduard Delacroix

Eduard Delacroix is scheduled for execution, and the guards prepare for the event. However, the execution goes horribly wrong when Percy Wetmore, a sadistic guard, deliberately sabotages the

sponge that is supposed to conduct the electricity, causing Delacroix to suffer a prolonged and agonizing death. The guards are horrified, and Paul is furious with Percy, but they are powerless to punish him due to his political connections. The incident deepens Paul's guilt and his determination to find a way to save Coffey. The part ends with the aftermath of the botched execution and the growing tension on the block.

Part Five: Night Journey

Paul and the other guards, except Percy, decide to take John Coffey outside the prison to use his healing power to save the warden's wife, who is dying of a brain tumor. They sneak Coffey out, and he performs a miraculous healing, drawing the tumor out of her and into himself, then releasing it into the air. The journey is risky and emotionally charged, and it solidifies the guards' belief in Coffey's innocence. However, they are still faced with the impossible choice of whether to defy the law and let Coffey go free. The part ends with their return to the prison and the looming execution date.

Part Six: Coffey on the Mile

The final part brings the story to its tragic conclusion. Paul and the guards make a last-ditch effort to save Coffey by offering to let him escape, but Coffey refuses, saying he is tired of the pain and suffering of the world. He accepts his fate, and the execution is carried out. Paul is devastated, and he and the other guards are forever changed by the experience. The narrative returns to the present, where Paul reveals that he is over a hundred years old, having been touched by Coffey's power, and he lives with the memory of his failure. The novel ends with Paul reflecting on the nature of justice and the weight of his choices.

Themes

- Justice and injustice
- Racism and prejudice
- The supernatural and the divine
- Guilt and redemption
- The death penalty
- Compassion and empathy

Notable Quotes

- "I'm tired, boss. Tired of bein' on the road, lonely as a sparrow in the rain. I'm tired of never havin' a buddy to be with, to tell me where we's goin' or comin' from, or why. Mostly I'm tired of people bein' ugly to each other." — John Coffey speaks to Paul Edgecombe just before his execution, explaining why he is ready to die.

- "The Green Mile is the longest mile in the world, and it's the last one you ever walk." — Paul Edgecombe narrates the significance of the Green Mile, the corridor leading to the electric chair.
- "He killed them with love, they said. He killed them with love and then he cried about it." — Paul Edgecombe reflects on the irony of John Coffey's conviction, given his gentle nature.
- "Sometimes the past is a place that you can't get back to, no matter how hard you try." — Paul Edgecombe, as an old man, reflects on the impossibility of changing the past.
- "We all owe a death. Every living thing does. But I think the good Lord might have made a mistake with me." — John Coffey speaks about his supernatural longevity and the burden of his gift.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is The Green Mile about?

The Green Mile is a novel by Stephen King set on death row in 1932. It follows Paul Edgecombe, a guard who encounters John Coffey, a gentle giant with healing powers, convicted of a crime he didn't commit. The story explores themes of justice, racism, and the supernatural, culminating in a tragic execution.

Is The Green Mile worth reading?

Yes, The Green Mile is widely considered one of Stephen King's best works. It blends horror, drama, and fantasy to tell a deeply emotional story about morality and humanity. The characters are memorable, and the plot is gripping. It's a must-read for fans of King and literary fiction alike.

How does The Green Mile end?

Spoiler: John Coffey is executed despite the guards' belief in his innocence. He refuses to escape, saying he is tired of the world's pain. Paul Edgecombe lives for over a century due to Coffey's healing touch, haunted by his failure to save him. The novel ends with Paul reflecting on the weight of his choices.

Who should read The Green Mile?

The Green Mile is ideal for readers who enjoy character-driven stories with a blend of supernatural elements and historical fiction. It appeals to fans of Stephen King, but also to those who appreciate literary fiction with moral depth. It's a good choice for book clubs due to its themes and discussion potential.

How long does it take to read The Green Mile?

The Green Mile is approximately 400 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes about 8-10 hours to read. Many readers finish it in a few days, especially because the serialized structure makes it easy to read in chunks.