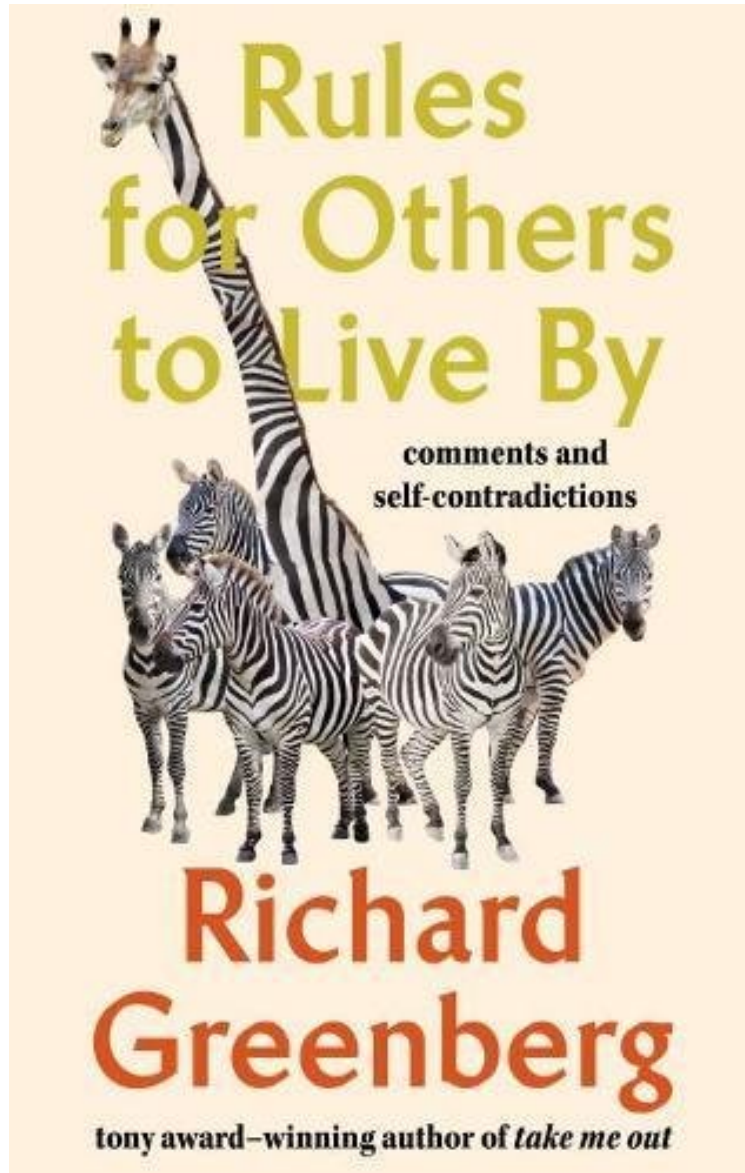


Rules for Others to Live By: Comments and Self-Contradictions

Richard Greenberg

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Richard Greenberg : Rules for Others to Live By: Comments and Self-Contradictions before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Rules for Others to Live By: Comments and Self-Contradictions:

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I am happy to say these essays — or, observations? —are every bit as sharp and moving and full of laughs, a-ha moments, and tears as are his plays — most of which straddle the line between comedy and drama, defying categorization.Mr. Greenberg sculpts so many glorious lines I hesitate to choose among them, but, here goes. She looked like an untaken photograph. There should have been a saxophone. Success radiated from her like quills from a porcupine.And there are many more surgically precise observations about people and places and situations, insights so imaginatively perceptive, one wants to approach Richard Greenberg, waving one's hand like a child wanting the next piggyback ride from the big, strong, fun adult, pleading, "Do me! Me next!" so one might have one's own Greenberg-metaphor to use forever as introduction so that one need never again try to explain one's self. "Oh, lovely to meet you, my name is Charlie and I am like a place you visit infrequently which is never anything at all like you remember it; one of those night terrors where walls and doors and windows have all been rearranged into unfamiliar architecture through which you can't find your way."Or, something like that only shorter and better. I feel as if Richard Greenberg could write me perfectly, because we are — save for his genius as a writer — alike in so many ways that as I read through the book I thought, perhaps, he'd been eavesdropping on my soul, or, he'd gotten the life I was supposed to have had. These: Even in the thick of situations, and very happy about it, I don't generally feel a part of things. I have a lot of friends who count on me to lend a sympathetic ear and give good counsel, but when I bother having a picture of myself.... As much as I enjoyed the party — as I enjoy most parties — in the cab after, I felt, as always, that I was heading back to freedom. Serious people exist. But they tend to be drowned out by these others whose loudness, speed, shallowness, and ubiquity wear me down and diminish my capacity to go slow and think hard. It' as though at some point it was decided the world was irreparably broken and all that's left for us is to be connoisseurs of the wreckage. I have a long history with people undergoing epiphanic breakthroughs, and it's been demoralizing when it hasn't been chilling. When I am very old, I am going to become a walker. I am going to walk up and down the few streets of my neighborhood, taking everything in, and I will be wearing my green coat. Even in early spring, I will be wearing the green coat. It will be patched in places and threadbare in others. Already, my friend Linda has had to sew back on a button that fell off from sheer fatigue. I don't discount the possibility that one day the buttons won't all match. Some of them may not be flush with the buttonholes. This is fine by me. I will walk in my tattered garment, surveilling my immediate surroundings with a captious eye. People will start to notice me. I will become something of a local character. I will have met my destiny, which is to be a flaneur, a walker in the city, as I would be already, were it not for my tendency to self-quarantine.Yes. So precisely and decisively me, it is uncanny. Which Pamela saw. Which is why she suggested I read it, because reading it had, in her, done that a-ha thing of a bell ring of, "Oh, this is so much Charlie, he should read this."Because, you see, another thing I've in common with Richard Greenberg is a life-story where the time is measured not in years, but in the presence of remarkable women I have known, of which Pamela is one. We met on Twitter and then, because she urged me and arranged it we met in Washington, D.C. one day, which, for me, is something of a miracle since it required of me the panic-attack inducing activities of driving forty minutes to a Metro stop, boarding a train and riding 30 more minutes into D.C., and walking the city until the meet-up time — because so terrified am I of being late, and so every-time-I-do-it certain I will not be able to navigate the Metro and thus head hopelessly in the wrong direction — I arrived in the city approximately two hours before the appointed hour for the first in person embrace — of which I was also terrified. (See above faux Greenberg metaphor about me. I'm better long-distance and in writing than I am in person and long-exposure, both of which reveal me to be rather less of the good and more of the bad than I seem to be when able to edit — not that I manage to shorten anything when I edit — such as this; MOST of my editing/re-writing is about adding clarifying sentences and clauses and too effing many adjectives to try to explain myself — my virtual self, and excuse myself — my IRL self.)Where was I? Oh, yes, Pamela. I'll return to Richard Greenberg quotes: I had no idea what she saw in me, but I didn't question it....Some people say the same things in the same way to everyone they know. You think you're conversing with them; you're merely partnering their monologue. Jill had conversations that pertained to the person she was talking to. There was no double-dealing in this. She saw us.That description of Richard Greenberg's friend, Jill, is what I'd say about she who recommended this book to me, my dear Pamela. Who has seen me — and I am not an easy see, and after having been seen require a lot of patience and effort at continuing to see — still, Pamela manages to find it in her heart to think of me when she reads a book she particularly likes and thinks I would enjoy. Like Rules For Others To Live By.If you've lived a life of observation, been befriended by marvelous, unique, interesting people, and always felt like the one watching through a window as others lived in the real world --- or, you just like insightful, great writing --- this one's for you.

“Richard Greenberg turns life upside down and sideways. Reading the provocative *Rules for Others to Live By* is like having dinner with a friend whose point of view shakes up and invariably runs counter to conventional thinking. He’s a debunker of the pretensions of daily life.” —Delia Ephron, author of *Sister Mother Husband Dog* and *Siracusa*

Between stressing about his theater friends and reconciling his complicated feelings about an inconsistently wonderful New York City, Tony Award-winning playwright and Pulitzer finalist Richard Greenberg also maintains a reputation for being something of a hermit. He takes the time to privately process the absurdity of the world outside, and the result is this hysterically funny and daringly thoughtful collection of original essays. In *Rules for Others to Live By*, he shares lessons from his highly successful writing career, observations from two long decades of residence on a three-block stretch of Manhattan, and musings from a complicated and occasionally taxing social life. Firmly sympathetic to the struggles of the more bizarre and unstable among us, Greenberg tackles a range of topics—from the difficulties of friendship to the art of writing, the pain of heartbreak to the curiously unpredictable weather of his neighborhood, and the moderate hypochondria that comes with age, as well as the more serious health crises that unfortunately also come with age. In essays that are at turns quietly subversive and thoroughly hopeful and life-affirming, Greenberg’s distinct and hilarious voice articulates our own mild obsessions and the idiosyncrasies that we can only hope will go unnoticed in a crowd.

“When Greenberg hits, he hits high, and seeing the world through his characters’ eye is most often an unparalleled pleasure...Greenberg misses nothing from his perch.” —Alex Witchel, *The New York Times Book* “The humor, the insight, and all the magic and madness of life in New York—reading *Rules for Others to Live By* is the next best thing to being Richard Greenberg’s friend.” —Patricia Clarkson, Oscar-, Tony-, and Golden Globe-nominated actress and Emmy Award winner for *Six Feet Under* “From its cheeky title to the arresting bons mots sprinkled throughout, *Rules for Others to Live By* is a breezy read that cloaks some penetrating truths. . . . [Greenberg] addresses many of the more vexing questions of modern life with tongue planted firmly in cheek. . . . Readers will be disappointed to reach the final page.” —Kirkus

About the Author Richard Greenberg has written two dozen plays, including the Tony Award-winning *Take Me Out*, which was a Pulitzer Prize finalist, as was his play *Three Days of Rain*. He is the winner of *Newsday*’s George Oppenheimer Award and the PEN/ Laura Pels Award for a playwright in mid-career. He lives in New York City.

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Introduction The young woman—a girl, really: eighteen—was touching. She was writing plays and frustrated that they were invariably about herself. I failed her. My advice boiled down to “There, there.” She was young; later she would be old. Things would sort themselves out. On the ride home from her question, I gave myself a do-over. Make a helpful answer. In the mirage of a second draft I said this: “Acknowledge that you’re the center of the universe, then radiate.” She wanted a specific exercise; she wanted out! Go online, I told her, and bring up the front page of the *New York Times* from the day you were born. Read every article. In amazement. True, we no longer believe A caused B then C happened, as playwrights who thought they were emulating Ibsen did. This should not be taken to mean that nothing causes anything. More that everything causes everything. We travel through clouds of influence. The *New York Times* will show you some of the influences into which you were born. Do they stun you? Does any of it seem familiar? The *New York Times* was already guessing what would be happening now; was it naive? Does anything explain that thing your dad is always saying? Does some fact interest you for reasons that apparently have nothing to do with you? Pursue it. In some distant manner, it’s connected to you. The best thinking says “the self” is a fiction (I have a piece about that), yet it’s a fiction that we all believe, our most intimate experience. Maybe it’s nothing more than our tendency to repeat. Maybe we repeat because when we do, we recognize the behavior and the familiarity is comforting. So the self is just the consolation of our tendencies. This is too deep for me. The reason I never write personal essays is that I have no idea who “I” is. Setting out to write some, I had to locate my main tendencies and, for the sake of convenience, label them. I would say I am an Urban Recluse. The phrase is problematic, luckily. My brother, who trained as an economist, once accused me, as though I transgressed, of being the kind of human integer that screwed up his quantitative analyses (at last, a virtue!). Maybe so. My life goes heavy on the interiors: still, it’s crucial that their windows look out on the densest, most complex, most confounding system of social arrangements yet devised. It’s what I like to watch. Then I make up stories about it. My tendency. When I call myself an Urban Recluse, I know the phrase doesn’t constitute an identity, much less a self. It’s the angle from which I radiate, and that’s all I have to say about it.

MANIFESTO

Wisdom I am a very wise man. How I know this is, a number of people have told me so, among them several who consider my intelligence average and my talent meh. Wisdom is another quality altogether. It might surprise you to learn of my wisdom, especially given that my life is patently disastrous. It’s the old saw about doing and teaching, which, in addition to being a truism, is true. You can see it in all kinds of situations. For example, drawing from my own world, there’s not a theater critic alive capable of writing a play, yet two of them are competent reviewers. When it comes to developing wisdom, failure turns out to be an advantage. I once talked to a group of playwriting students among whom, startlingly, was a woman who had written four novels that had been decent commercial and strong critical successes but who claimed she had no idea what she was doing. I didn’t believe this. You simply cannot have

four consecutive flukes. She was adamant. Years later, I read a book about the early days of Barbra Streisand and I understood what the novelist meant. It seems that Barbra never valued her singing because it was too easy for her. "I just open my mouth and it comes out right," she said. This is what the novelist found so perplexing: she had stories to tell and she knew how to tell them. Having read novels, she was able to write novels. She knew what she was doing; what she didn't know was how to describe what she was doing. I don't teach playwriting very often, but when I do I'm pretty good at it because I've faltered as a playwright in so many ways. I look at the student plays and think, almost dotingly, "Ah yes: that mistake! Remember it well. Made it myself in the hardscrabble winter of eighty-six." Failure begets consciousness begets, sometimes, technique. I've messed up at living even more spectacularly than I have at writing, thus my status as a fount. If I have a limitation as a wisdom-giver, it's my too-easy assumption that others are far more capable than I am. As a result, I become testy when they don't follow the rules I set out for them, rules I would never think of applying to my own life. I'm trying to get better about this. Before I was a wise man, I believe I was a bit of a charlatan. That was during my late twenties and early thirties. People were always coming up to me and thanking me for changing their lives when I said to them such-and-such. The problem was that when they quoted such-and-such back to me, I neither remembered saying it nor had any idea if I believed it. In those days, my wisdom was what I would call cadential wisdom. The sentences I put out had the shape and rhythm of truth but were actually rather vapid. You can go far on this talent. The late Maya Angelou wrote the beautiful memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. After that, she became a public figure, in which role she was a virtuosa of cadential wisdom, and the power of the curious things she said was magnified by her extraordinary speaking voice. This is why when Oprah shares something like, "Dr. Angelou once said to me, 'Oprah, it's cold out; put on a sweater,' it never quite hits us with the prophetic force with which it evidently bushwhacked Oprah. Elaine Stritch, rest in peace, was a great actress and riveting Broadway star. She was also imputed with a high degree of cadential wisdom. Show folk thought she carried all sorts of salty insight. I worked with Elaine for two weeks in the late nineties and I thought she was out of her mind. Being out of your mind is not a detriment when it comes to cadential wisdom, as long as you find adherents for your particular wisdom-giving style. This sort of thing has been going on forever. In its modern form, it can be traced back to the sixties, when traditional authority was laid siege and people were freed up to submit to whatever bogus, mumbo-jumbo authority they found sexy. It made no difference that the things these authorities preached never tallied with what was really going on, because so many people had stopped thinking. They had simply stopped thinking.