

Gold MacDonald

For Travis McGee's creator, the writing business was no mystery

By LEONARD CASSUTO

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As Americans debate their retirement options, they should look to the example of private investigator Travis McGee. The immortal creation of crime novelist John D. MacDonald, McGee would "retire" after each payday until the money ran out, on the theory that it's better to enjoy your golden years in installments while you're young.

It's been 20 years since MacDonald, who died in 1986 at the age of 70, wrote the last of his 21 Travis McGee novels. But the books all remain in print and, what's more, eminently relevant. Musing on global problems while solving local ones, McGee was a meditative action hero who offered opinions on war, drugs, race relations, corruption, and other issues of both yesterday and today. The prescient social vision of the McGee series continues to shape contemporary crime fiction.

McGee lives aboard a houseboat called The Busted Flush in a bohemian dockside community in Fort Lauderdale. He drives a Rolls Royce that has been converted into a pickup truck, drinks Plymouth gin, and loves women, lots of them. McGee describes himself as a "salvage consultant," not a professional private detective (he keeps half of what he recovers). He takes jobs on spec or, more often, to do favors for his friends. But these ventures quickly turn into conflicts with ruthlessly corrupt businessmen and sadistic killers.

The criminals in the McGee novels remain startlingly current. Through his repeated explorations of murderers who love meanness and cruelty for their own sake, MacDonald outlined the character type of the modern fictional serial killer. Indeed, MacDonald's villains stand as the godfathers of Hannibal Lecter and his epigone. Yet this literary innovation has gone largely uncredited.

The villains in the McGee series uphold MacDonald's conviction that pure malevolence can walk the earth in human form. Against the therapeutic grain of his times, MacDonald believed, as he wrote in the literary journal "Clues," in "a kind of evil which defies the Freudian explanations of the psychologists, and the environmental explanations of the sociologists." This type of evil appears repeatedly in MacDonald's books in the form of Nazi torturers, sadistic scientists, truncheon-loving policemen, and hired killers who delight in their work.

The accountant-turned-murderer in "A Tan and Sandy Silence" (1971), for example, tortures his victims for the information needed to complete a complex swindle, but loves inflicting pain so

much that he decides to use his extorted gains to finance a new vocation as a recreational sadist.

But MacDonald wasn't just interested in monstrous killers. More than any other crime writer before him, he focused on the details of corrupt business practices. In "Pale Gray for Guilt" (1968), McGee uncovers the workings of a greedy developer who first ruins a friend of McGee's and then has him murdered. With the help of Meyer, the economist who lives on the houseboat next door, McGee devises a complex con that combines an apparent real-estate flip with an invitation to what looks like a foolproof insider trading scheme. The crooked financier falls for it, and MacDonald renders McGee's revenge in meticulous financial detail.

MacDonald's focus on the business scene was no accident. He held a Harvard MBA, and probably would have made a career in business but for his espionage work during World War II. Because his letters were censored, he wrote short stories home instead. His wife sold one and, spurred by this surprise success, MacDonald decided he would be a writer.

Initially living on his army discharge pay, MacDonald wrote hundreds of stories and received as many rejections until he learned his trade -- all in a matter of months. This harsh apprenticeship gave MacDonald a clear-eyed professionalism which he never lost. He had already written 43 books when, in 1964, he introduced Travis McGee in "The Deep Blue Goodbye," branding the series by putting the name of a different color in each title.

Ever industrious, and thinking like an entrepreneur as well as an artist, MacDonald wrote the first three McGee books ahead to build up an inventory. Fawcett published them a month apart to give the series a running start.

Always aware of the bottom line, MacDonald continued to write for the paperback market long after he could have gained greater cachet -- but fewer royalties -- by publishing in hardcover. That way, he didn't have to share the proceeds from a sale of paperback rights with a hardcover publishing house. MacDonald carefully explored the tax law affecting professional writers, and even wrote a financial advice pamphlet that he gave out for free to his "fellow ink-stained wretches." By the early '70s, the McGee series had brought MacDonald considerable financial rewards.

Unlike McGee, MacDonald planned his financial future carefully. He left an estate worth over \$9 million -- and a lot of valuable copyrights. He also left an enduring legacy of artistic achievement in a genre whose practitioners are usually forgotten before the ink dries on their last books.

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