

FOUR MORE TRAVIS McGEE NOVELS

The salvage agent redresses grievances in Florida (and elsewhere) managing to avoid being gator bait

by John D. MacDonald

If you're going to have a reading addiction, you can do a lot worse than the works of Mr. MacDonald. Here are four more earlier Travis McGee books I'm sneaking into my program:

- The Quick Red Fox (1964)
- Bright Orange for the Shroud (1965)
- Pale Gray for Guilt (1968)
- The Long Lavender Look (1970)

MacDonald is one of the most prolific writers of quality detective thrillers in history. The Travis McGee Series consists of 21 books; with these I'm reviewing I've read a total of seven. Like some of my favorite authors—especially Larry McMurtry, Elmore Leonard, or Tony Hillerman—or favorite extended stories in cinema—Lonesome Dove, the TV series Friday Night Lights, or the miniseries John Adams—it's going to be really tough for me to reach the end of the road and read the final John MacDonald Travis McGee book. Fortunately, there are several more to come.

The Quick Red Fox

1964, Fawcett Publications, 160 pages

In this installment of the McGee series, a well-known actress is being blackmailed with photographs for once having participated in a sex and drug bacchanalia several years earlier. Travis is retained by the actress under direction of a beautiful young personal assistant, Dana, who starts off with him like an ice queen, but eventually comes around. They travel together to track down each individual who was present at the incident, doing the detective work to find the blackmailers and put them out of business.

As with virtually all of his works, MacDonald has Travis speak out against and in favor of various cultural realities (these will occupy much of my reviews on this page). The following two segments occur close to each other, as Travis and Dana home in on one of the suspects in Southern California. This first hits home with virtually anyone of the freedom persuasion:

...I get the feeling that this is the last time in history when the offbeats like me will have a chance to live free in the nooks and crannies of the huge and rigid structure of an increasingly codified society. Fifty years from now I would be hunted down in the street. They would drill little holes in my skull and make me sensible and reliable and adjusted. — 96

Then, in a similar cryout for some individualism by golly (yet with a puzzling swipe at some heavyweight writers), we get one of the best MacDonald rants against cookie cutter society:

Santa Rosita was a stunted version of the Santa Barbara code of existence. Three industries, electronics, plastics and tourists, and squeeze the bejaysus out of all three. It was sharing the big boom-boom. The incomparably dull tract houses, glitteringly new, were marching out across the hills, cluttered with identical station wagons, identical children, identical barbecues, identical tastes in flowers and television. You see, Virginia, there really is a Santa Rosita, full of plastic people, in plastic houses, in areas noduled by the vast basketry of their shopping centers. But do not blame them for being so tiresome and so utterly satisfied with themselves. Because you see there is no one left to tell them what they are and what they really should be doing.

The dullest wire services the world has ever seen fill their little monopoly newspapers with self-congratulatory pap. Their radio is unspeakable. Their television is geared to a minimal approval by thirty million of them. And anything thirty million people like, aside from their more private functions, is bound to be bad. Their schools are group-adjustment centers, fashioned to shame the rebellious. Their churches are weekly votes of confidence in God. Their politicians are enormously likable, never saying a cross word.

The goods they buy grow increasingly more shoddy each year, though brighter in color. For those who still read, they make do for the most part with the portentous gruntings of Uris, Wouk, Rand and others of that same witless ilk. Their magazine fare is fashioned by nervous committees.

You see, dear, there is no one left to ask them a single troublesome question. Such as: Where have you been and where are you going and is it worth it. — 97

Right arm! Except for the weird dump on Rand (and Uris and Wouk for that matter)[1] The Quick Red Fox makes for a deep and intricate love story... and a fair whodunit. MacDonald writes his women great.

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Bright Orange for the Shroud

1965, Fawcett Publications, 190 pages

A fine little yarn about a confidence game that leaves Arthur, a well-to-do friend of Travis's, penniless and all beat up. It's a woman who sucked him in, and played the trick on many others..."a fragile looking blonde like a black widow spider feeding on her mate." But it's a whole group that put the game together... including a particularly vicious and conniving redneck hillbilly from way back when who causes Travis a serious amount of concern, not to mention danger, not to mention pain and injury.

Some of the action finds McGee and his client(s) in the Florida Everglades, which provides a vehicle for MacDonald to give us some environmental sensibilities:

...having failed in every attempt to subdue the Glades by frontal attack, we are slowly killing it off by tapping the River of Grass. In the questionable name of progress, the state in its vast wisdom lets every two-bit developer divert the flow into the draglined canals that give him "waterfront" lots to sell. As far north as Corkscrew Swamp, virgin stands of ancient bald cypress are dying. All the area north of Copeland had been logged out, and will never come back. As the Glades dry, the big fires come with increasing frequency. The ecology is changing with egret colonies dwindling, mullet getting scarce, mangrove dying of diseases born of dryness.

But it will take a long time to kill it. And years from now foolish men will still be able to kill themselves off within miles of help, hopelessly lost among islands which all look alike. It is a black land, and like every wilderness in the world, it punishes quickly when a mistake is made, quickly and with a casual, savage indifference.

There are a couple of other good passages en route to the satisfying conclusion. I have marked them, but I won't bore you with long passages. In one Travis is commenting on some spoiled teenagers out at a drug store in Naples, Florida: "And have you noticed how many fat kids there are lately?" (The offhand observation of fat kids and children recurs in the books I've read; you wonder if MacDonald has it in for the chubs, but he certainly doesn't look fat free himself in the occasional picture. Perhaps a morbidly obese relative?)

Then later, he makes some pithy observations on auto nation: "In some remote year the historians will record that Twentieth Century America attempted the astonishing blunder of changing its culture to fit automobiles instead of people, putting a skin of concrete and asphalt over millions of acres of arable land, rotting the hearts of their cities, so encouraging the proliferation of murderous, high-speed junk..." etc.

Anyway, the pursuit of the bad guy(s) works out. Though you can see in these earlier books that McGee absorbs a lot of physical punishment in return for his "beach bum" life style. One wonders how long he can last undergoing this level of abuse.

Pale Gray for Guilt

1968, Fawcett Publications, 224 pages

In Pale Gray, another friend of Travis's takes a big loss... he's killed. Tush Bannon was a good guy with a nice wife and three kids, struggling to make it as an independent businessman running a small marina on the Florida coast. But he was in the way of a big land-development scheme, and the developers had him removed from the scene.

Travis takes it very personally, and conspires with friends of the widow to recover a large amount of money through a clever ruse in the stock market. The financials are way over my head, but we get some vintage McGee insights on the path to wealth recovery and salvage. The following is a memorable rumination on the nature of death:

I looked out of the jet at December gray, at cloud towers reaching up toward us. Tush was gone, and too many others were gone, and I sought chill comfort in an analogy of death that has been with me for years. It doesn't explain or justify. It just seems to remind me of how things are.

Picture a very swift torrent, a river rushing down between rocky walls. There is a long, shallow bar of sand and gravel that runs right down the middle of the river. It is under water. You are born and you have to stand on that narrow, submerged bar, where everyone stands. The ones born before you, the ones older than you, are up upriver from you. The younger ones stand braced on the bar downriver. And the whole long bar is moving down the river of time, washing away at the upstream end and building up downstream....

It's a pretty long soliloquy—actually, when you read it carefully, it seems a bit strained—but I appreciate McGee's sensitivity to a universal concern, especially for a man of action who's probably still in his 30s. Travis later makes some other pithy observations about the "manipulators" who populate our 'investment' systems. Could have been written about all the Wall Street friends and insiders on the Bush (and Obama, and all the other presidents) economic team(s).

Anyway, justice is accomplished without too much additional damage to McGee's beatup bones.

The Long Lavender Look

1970, Fawcett Publications, 255 pages

In the Long Lavender Look, McGee is motoring along in the Florida swamplands at night when a girl comes running in front of his car. He swerves and lands in ten feet of swamp water. Then walking along the deserted road someone in a pickup truck tries to gun him down with a rifle. When he finally gets to town and reports the incidents to the authorities, he's arrested and charged with murder. Start of a very strange week for our hero with what appear to be another bunch of redneck hillbillies from way back when... except the sheriff doesn't fit the mold. Travis makes the following pertinent observation about law enforcement as he's trying to get sprung from jail:

The law, in its every dimension of the control of criminals, is geared to limited, stunted people. Regardless of what social, emotional, or economic factor stunted them, the end product is hate, suspicion, fear, violence, and despair. These are weaknesses, and the system is geared to exploit weaknesses. Mr. Norm was a creature outside my experience. There were no labels I could put on him.

Turns out the situation calls for Travis's friend and occasional dockside neighbor in Lauderdale, Meyer, who helps McGee with access to a extraordinarily successful defense attorney... sort of a Geoffrey Fieger of Florida. So he's freed, there's a fortune in stolen money somewhere close by, and there are a couple of shady, scary characters who are angling to keep aholt of it. Trav picks up a damsel in distress to satisfy his normal salvaging rules of the road—he aims to keep half of what's recovered.

On the way to figuring things out he learns that one of the thieves has developed a business renting out women to visiting poobahs. Some of the women are in it for the money, but others the villain has pressed into service involuntarily thru blackmail and physical intimidation. This provides a marvelous opportunity for MacDonald/McGee to comment on the stark reality of the character of "commercial beaver:"

There are no hookers with hearts of gold. Just lazy, greedy, dull-minded girls whose greatest joys are the clothing rack and the mirror and the makeup table. Such a simple little task, to take that ever-familiar tumescent rigidity into the slippery muscular depths, and brace tight, and hip-smack it into its brief leapings and sagging flaccidity. Simple task, sometimes pleasurable enough to incite an inner matching clenching, hidden explosion, and sighing release. Then say it was beautiful, tell him he's special, tell him it hardly ever happens like that for you. Give him the mirror-practiced expressions, and use the familiar ways to ready him again, because the better you work him, the more chance of a tip, and the thirty-dollar blue sandals are on layaway, and they are darling.

Wow. The accolades for John D. MacDonald's writing are practically universal among the other best writers of the world. And they are more than deserved. The way he phrases these observations is worth ten times the price of admission; it is truly half the reason I read him. The other half is the intricate logic of the plots: it's a genre where a certain amount of formula is unavoidable, but like the best baseball games of all time, almost every one of the MacDonald pieces is uniquely fascinating in its details... some more favorite than others.

In Long Lavender, another one of Travis's 21 lives seems to pass before his eyes, but he soldiers on getting the best of a couple you wouldn't want to meet except at the end of a rope on a tree limb.

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Long Lavender Look | Pale Gray | Bright Orange | Quick Red | Travis McGee