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TRAVIS McGEE BOOKS
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John D. MacDonald PALE GRAY FOR GUILT

A TRAVIS
McGEE
NOVEL

PALE GRAY FOR GUILT

John D. MacDonald

**Introduction
by Carl Hiaasen**

FAWCETT CREST • NEW YORK

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A Fawcett Crest Book

Published by Ballantine Books

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TRAVIS MCGEE

For a big man, Tush Bannon was a pussycat: devoted to his wife and three kids, optimistic about his motel and marina business, always cheerful to his old football pal, Travis McGee. But then the big-money real estate interests decided they needed Tush's measly ten acres—which just happened to be in the middle of a rich parcel of five hundred river-front acres. Suddenly, the ever-happy Tush was suicidal—and Travis McGee wouldn't rest until he found the man with the pale gray look of guilt who had destroyed his gentle friend. . . .

John D. MacDonald

"As a young writer, all I ever wanted was to touch readers as powerfully as John D. MacDonald touched me. No price could be placed on the enormous pleasure that his books have given me. He captured the mood and the spirit of his times more accurately, more hauntingly, than any 'literature' writer—yet managed always to tell a thunderingly good, intensely suspenseful tale."

—DEAN KOONTZ

Please turn the page for more praise. . . .

"John D. MacDonald is a shining example for all of us in his field. Talk about *the best*."

—MARY HIGGINS CLARK

"I envy the generation of readers just discovering Travis McGee and count myself among the many readers savoring his adventures again."

—SUE GRAFTON

"John D. MacDonald created a staggering quantity of wonderful books, each with characterization, suspense, and an almost intoxicating sense of place. The Travis McGee novels are among the finest works of fiction ever penned by an American author and they retain a remarkable sense of freshness."

—JONATHAN KELLERMAN

"Travis McGee is the last of the great knights errant; honorable, sensual, skillful, and tough. I can't think of anyone who has replaced him. I can't think of anyone who would dare."

—DONALD WESTLAKE

"When you despair of what passes for storytelling in today's dumbed-down video 'culture,' I have a prescription that works every time: Return to the Masters. Turn on some Gershwin, Ellington, Cole Porter, curl up, and open to the first page of a John D. MacDonald novel. You shall be restored!"

—JOSEPH WAMBAUGH

"There's only one thing as good as reading a John D. MacDonald novel: reading it again. A writer way ahead of his time, his Travis McGee books are as entertaining, insightful, and suspenseful today as the moment I first read them. He is the all-time master of the American mystery novel."

—JOHN SAUL

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"Perhaps no one can be really a good appreciating pagan who has not once been a bad puritan."

—BOURNE

Introduction

I WAS born and raised near Bahia Mar, the Fort Lauderdale yacht basin where Travis McGee moored his poker-prize houseboat, the *Busted Flush*.

Slip F-18, as every true fan of John D. MacDonald knows.

Here roamed one of American fiction's most popular recurring knights—McGee, knockabout retriever of lost fortunes, saver of spiraling souls; McGee of the deep-water tan, scarred knuckles, and untender mercies.

Rugged and sentimental, fearless and flawed, he was everything a connoisseur of private-eye capers could want. "Wary of all earnestness," is how McGee described himself— although he made exceptions when it came to his love life.

Perhaps he'd have been an equally appealing character had MacDonald consigned him to Manhattan, Chicago, London, or Marrakesh. But McGee lived on a boat, and there's no better place for one of those than Fort Lauderdale.

Today South Florida is a prime destination for

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crime novelists and their ambivalent, salty, sun-baked, raw-boned heroes. This was not the case in the 1960s. When you thought of the Gold Coast, you thought of bikinis and not MAC-10s, Connie Francis and not the Calí cartel.

I was only eleven years old when Travis McGee parked the *Busted Flush* at Bahia Mar for *The Deep Blue Good-bye*. In those days, Lauderdale had been the scene of several bad movies and scarcely any books. Imagine the kick in discovering a clever action novel set in one's own hometown! McGee and I ran on the same beaches, rambled the same roads, fished the same flats, ate at the same seafood joints, and avoided the same tourists.

His bittersweet view of South Florida was the same as my own. For me and many natives, some of McGee's finest moments were when he paused, mid-adventure, to inveigh against the runaway exploitation of this rare and dying paradise.

If a cypress swamp got plowed to make way for another shopping mall, he took it personally: "This was instant Florida, tacky and stifling and full of ugly and spurious energies."

Every McGee saga guarantees such splendidly mordant commentary. The customary targets are greedhead developers, crooked politicians, chamber-of-commerce flacks, and the cold-hearted scammers who flock like buzzards to the Sunshine State. For John D. MacDonald, these were not just useful fictional villains; they were villains of real life.

When he passed away unexpectedly in 1986, millions of fans worldwide wondered what would become of Travis McGee. Not me. I wondered what would become of Florida without him.

Most readers loved MacDonald's work because he told a rip-roaring yarn. I loved it because he was the first modern writer to nail Florida dead-center, to

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capture all its languid sleaze, racy sense of promise, and breath-grabbing beauty.

He had the same sort of wise, cynical eye that Raymond Chandler cast so stylishly upon the misled mankind of Los Angeles, yet MacDonald's McGee seems more outraged than Chandler's Marlowe.

Standard McGee commentary drips citric acid:

"Now, of course, 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 drag-lined canals that give him 'waterfront' lots to sell. . . ."

MacDonald wrote those words thirty years ago, long before most politicians knew or cared what an environmentalist was, or gave any thought to "saving" the Everglades, which is now a standard campaign anthem. More remarkably, MacDonald fit that splendid little diatribe into the mouth of a boat-bum private eye, and let him deliver it in the pages of a crime novel!

Most writers are delighted to achieve, on that rare occasion, a true and full sense of place—whether it's a city, a country, a valley, a jungle, the bowel of a volcano, or the bottom of the sea. MacDonald wanted his readers to do much more than see Florida. He seemed to want them to care about it as deeply as he did; celebrate it, marvel at it, laugh about it, grieve for it, and even fight for it.

His passion surfaced often in a pensive McGee, reliving canoe trips "down the Withlacoochee, adrift in a slow current, seeing the morning mist rising at the base of the limestone buttes, seeing the sudden heart-stopping dip and wheel of a flight of birds of incredible whiteness . . ."

. . . or recalling "that slow slide of the gator down

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the mudbank into the pond, see his eye knobs watching me, see a dance cloud of a billion gnats in the ray of sun coming through Spanish moss."

Most hard-bitten sleuths could not pass for a poet-naturalist, or a political wag. Travis McGee was special. *Is* special. He would not be McGee without his reflections. Once, while tangled in a particularly foul mess, he wondered why he bothered to remain in Florida as the place went steadily to hell. It's a question many of us have asked ourselves.

Here's how McGee answered it:

"Tacky though it might be, its fate uncertain, too much of its destiny in the hands of men whose sole thought was grab the money and run, cheap little politicians with blow-dried hair, ice-eyed old men from the North with devout claims about their duties to their shareholders, big-rumped good old boys from the cattle counties with their fingers in the till right up to their cologned armpits—it was still my place in the world. It is where I am and where I will stay, right up to the point where the Neptune Society sprinkles me into the dilute sewage off the Fun Coast."

Sometimes I wonder what McGee would think of the place today. In the eight years since John D. MacDonald died, the Florida peninsula has swollen with about 2.5 million newcomers. Urban-gauge crime, crumbling schools, job shortages, water shortages, floods, pollution, traffic gridlock, killer toads, walking catfish, and even a respectable hurricane have failed to discourage these intrepid fortune seekers. The accelerated clotting of population has made the social climate commensurately more corrupt, more stressed, more violent, more bizarre, and more rootless. Scoundrels abound. McGee would find no shortage of adventures.

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So maybe now it *is* time to wonder: Where is he? What happened to the *Busted Flush*?

In all the years, I've never stopped to look for Slip F-18 at Bahia Mar. It is, after all, a very large marina. Quite possibly the old houseboat is tied there still; McGee on deck, tending a few fresh bruises, sipping his Boodles, and watching the summer sun slide from the sky over Las Olas Boulevard.

Anyway, that's what I want to believe. If he's really gone, I prefer not to know.

Carl Hiaasen
Islamorada, Florida
December 1994

One

THE NEXT to the last time I saw Tush Bannon alive was the very same day I had that new little boat running the way I wanted it to run, after about six weeks of futzing around with it.

So on the test run I demonstrated one of our contemporary maladies: You can't just go out and ride around in car, boat, or airplane—you have to have a destination.

Then you feel purposeful.

So in the early morn on a flat, calm, overcast day I stocked the ice chest on the little *Muñequita* from my ship's stores on the *Busted Flush*, locked up the *Flush*, dropped down into my new playtoy, and, as what faint breeze there was seemed to be coming out of the southwest, I stuck my nose out of the pass to see if I could run north outside. The long, slow gray-green lift and fall of the ground swell was all of a towering five inches high, so I took it a mile off the beaches and fooled with the rpm and the fuel flow-meter, until she was riding right and sounded right and just a hair under 3,000 on each of the OMC

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120-horse stern-drive units. I then turned the steering over to the little Calmec autopilot, took a bearing on the Lauderdale Municipal Casino and noted the time.

That, of course, is one of the fussy little enchantments of a new boat—new being either brand-new or secondhand new. What you are hunting for is the optimum relationship between fuel consumption and distance. You tell yourself that maybe someday you are going to get caught very short, and you are going to have to squeak back into port with no more than half a cup of fuel left, with luck, and it would be very nice to know what rpm leaves you the least chance of running dry.

But like the exercise of caution in almost every human activity, the fusspots who make it their business to know are the ones least likely to ever have that ticklish problem. It's the ones who never check it out who keep the Coast Guard choppers busy.

The little boat was aimed back up the Florida east coast toward Broward Beach, where I had picked her up on an estate sale from a law firm. She'd belonged to a Texan named Kayd whose luck had run out somewhere in the Bahamas.

It's a funny thing about boat names. She had that *Muñequita* across the stern in four-inch white letters against that nice shade of Gulf Stream blue when I brought her on back to Bahia Mar. Spanish for "little doll." One night Meyer and Irv Deibert and Johnny Dow and I sat around trying to dream up a name that would match the *Busted Flush*. Little Flush? Inside Straight? Hole Card? The Ante? And I forget which one we decided was best because when I got around to changing it, I looked at the name it had and I decided that trying to match it to the name on the mother ship was a case of the quaints and the cutes, and I liked the name just fine. It was a little

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doll and had begun to acquire in my mind a personality that could very well resent being called anything else, and would sulk and wallow.

I switched the FM-UHF marine radio to the commercial frequencies and tried to find something that didn't sound like somebody trying to break up a dogfight in a sorority house by banging drums and cymbals. Not that I want to say it isn't music. Of course it is music, styled to accompany teenage fertility rites, and thus is as far out of my range as "Rockabye Baby." FM radio was a great product when it was servicing a fringe area of the great American market. But it has turned into a commercial success, so they have denigrated the sound, and they have mickey-moused the stereo, and you have to really search that dial to find something that isn't either folk hoke, rickyticky rock, or the saccharine they pump into elevators, bus stations and Howard Johnsons.

As I was about to give up I found some pleasant eccentric, or somebody who'd grabbed the wrong record, playing Brubeck doing Cole Porter, and I caught it just as he opened up "Love for Sale" in a fine and gentle manner, and then handed it delicately over to Desmond, who set up a witty dialogue with Joe Morello.

After telling myself that ten of eight in the morning is beer time only for the lowest types, I cracked a bottle of Carta Blanca and stood in the forward well, leaning through the center opening where I'd laid the hinged windshield over to port, out of the way, forearms on the smoke-blue foredeck shell.

Well, I was on my way to see old Tush after too long, and I had wind in my face like a happy dog leaning out a car window. The wake was straight. The engines ran sweetly in sync. I could feel the slow rise and fall in the imperceptible ground swell. The overcast was starting to burn off, the sea starting to

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glint. I could see pigmy figures over on the beach by Sea Ranch. Even with the investment in the playtoy, I still had a comforting wad of currency back in the cache aboard the *Busted Flush* at Slip F-18, Bahia Mar.

It had been a fine long hot lazy summer, a drifting time of good fish, old friends, new girls, of talk and laughter.

Cold beer, good music and a place to go.

That's the way They do you. That's the way They set you up for it. There ought to be a warning bell on the happymeter, so that every time it creeps high enough, you get that dang-dang alert. Duck, boy. That glow makes you too visible. One of Them is out there in the boonies, adjusting the windage, getting you lined up in the cross hairs of the scope. When it happens so often, wouldn't you think I'd be more ready for it?

I took my right-angle sight on a water tower just beyond Ocean Ridge, one that measures almost exactly thirty miles north of the Municipal Casino, and my elapsed time was sixty-two minutes. I wrote that down, along with fuel consumption, so I could do the math later, breaking it down in the way that to me is easiest to remember, statute miles per gallon at x rpm.

The wind was freshening and quartering into the south, and though I was still comfortable, I decided it wasn't going to last very long, so I went through Boynton Inlet into Lake Worth. The OMC's were still green enough so that too much constant speed wasn't the best thing in the world, so as soon as I had a nice open straightaway up the Waterway without traffic, I pushed it up to 4,200 rpm, estimating it at about 45 miles an hour. I estimated I had fifty if I ever needed it, and hoped I'd never get in a bind where I needed it. I held her there for five or six