



**R** **EADING**

**FOR**

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**S** **URVIVAL**

**JOHN D. MACDONALD**



Book-of-the-Month Club, Inc.

Dear Fellow Book Lover,

We wanted to share with you this essay by the late John D. MacDonald. We think you'll agree that its theme is important, and we hope you'll be as delighted as we were by Mr. MacDonald's provocative way of stating his case by engaging two of his most memorable characters, Travis McGee and Meyer, in a Socratic dialogue. To Mr. MacDonald, the ability to read was not only a source of pleasure, but a survival skill, and he gave that belief memorable expression in this piece, which was one of his last written works.

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JOHN D. MACDONALD

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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The theme will be the terrible isolation of the nonreader, his life without meaning or substance because he cannot comprehend the world in which he lives.

The best way to make my words fall usefully upon deaf ears is to use such colorful language that it will be quoted, sooner or later, to a great many of the nonreaders.

JOHN D. MACDONALD  
*to the Center for the Book*  
*October 1985*



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The big thunder-engine of early summer was moving into sync along Florida's east coast, sloshing millions of tons of water onto the baked land and running off too quickly—as it always does.

An impressive line of anvil clouds marched ashore on that Friday afternoon in June, electrocuting golfers, setting off burglar alarms, knocking out phone and power lines, scaring the whey out of the newcomers.

Meyer's live-aboard cruiser, the *Thorstein Veblen*, had been hauled for some bottom work, and he was spending the day aboard my houseboat, the *Busted Flush*. I was doing a job I hate and had avoided for too long, sorting out the music cassettes, setting aside the giveaways and the ones to erase, getting them all back into the right boxes.

After a very impressive flash / crack / boom the lights went out, the air-conditioning groaned to a stop,

and the refrigerator made a gargling sound and faded into the silence. Wind gusts were tilting and creaking the old houseboat. I looked out and saw how high the heavy rain was bouncing off the decks and superstructure of my neighbors at Bahia Mar, Fort Lauderdale.

Meyer put his book aside and levered himself up out of my best chair. He yawned and stretched, a broad, solid bear of a man, a hairy freelance economist, teacher, and lecturer, a friend of man and beast.

“Too dark for reading,” I said.

“I wasn’t reading, Travis.”

“Please excuse me. My mistake. You had the book open and you were staring down at the pages and I thought . . . foolishly enough . . .”

“I was thinking about something. A passage in the book started me thinking about something.”

“Like what?”

No reply. I don’t think he heard me. When you and I think, it is a fairly simple process. A lot of fuzzy notions bump about in our skulls like play toys in a roiled swimming pool. With brute force and exasperation we sort them into a row and reach a conclusion, the quicker the better. With Meyer it is quite a different process. He has a skull like a house I read about once, where an old lady kept building on rooms because she thought if she ever stopped building she would die. It became an architectural maze, hundreds of rooms stuck on every which way. Meyer knows his

way around his rooms. He knows where the libraries are, and the little laboratories, the computer rooms, the print shop, the studios. When he thinks, he wanders from room to room, looking at a book here, a pamphlet there, a specimen across the hall. His ideas are compilations of the thought and wisdom he has accumulated up until now.

I knew that if I kept my mouth shut he would probably show me an edge of his idea, a quick flash of it, a suggestion of its shape. Later, when he had worked it over, smoothed it out, tucked in the dangling edges, he might tell me the whole thing—provided he thought it was in an area that might interest me, and that I could comprehend.

I took a pair of battery lanterns out of a locker, put one on the coffee table and took the other into the galley alcove. I saw no point in starting up my own generator. The rain had cooled the afternoon all the way down to probably eighty degrees. But if the power stayed off, my ice supply was endangered, and I decided to use it to save it. I did not ask him to join me in a Boodles on the rocks. I went ahead and made two of them in the big old-fashioned glasses and went to where he stood and put one in his hand.

He raised it slowly, absently, to his lips, took a swallow. It startled him. He looked at the drink and then at me. "Sorry," he said. "I was just . . ."

"I know. Thinking."

He took another swallow. He walked over and sat by the coffee table and put his drink near the lantern.

"Strange thing about an idea," he said. "You can never tell whether it is so totally obvious it seems simple-minded, or whether it is composed of relationships you should have seen before. Most ideas are merely structures—things built on bits of knowledge and insight you already possess. If the knowledge you possess is in error, the structure will be flawed."

I sat across from him. "What's this one about?"

"Maybe the stress of survival."

"I've been stressed now and then."

"I am thinking of the long range. Hundreds of thousands of years. Millions of years. The stress of survival caused adaptations. Specific adaptations. The neck of the giraffe. The cushioned brain of the woodpecker. The nematocysts of the Portuguese man-of-war."

"The what?"

"The poisonous areas on the tentacles."

"Oh."

"Specific adaptations developed over long periods of time to preserve the species. Grazing animals which lived on the leaves of trees had to grow longer and longer necks, or starve. Just as man breeds show dogs and beef cattle. And turkeys with so much weight of breast meat, their legs are all sinew. Biological evolution creates precise adaptations so that a

creature can survive in one single environment. And certainly man has developed through biological evolution. What man has grown for himself over millennia is this wondrous stack of neurons and blood vessels encased in bone." And he rapped himself on the skull with his knuckles.

"A lot of church people aren't going to think too much of your idea, if this is the way you have to lead into it."

"Creationism? Garden of Eden? The world is six thousand years old? Every word in the Bible is true? Everybody has a right to his or her belief, Travis. But no one has the right to impose it by statute and ordinance on anyone else against his or her will. These days the Shiites are trying to impose on the Sunnis their particular version of the Koran. A very warlike version. Forcible imposition doesn't work."

"Okay, Meyer. Let's assume mankind grew this brain. How come?"

"He grew it very quickly, in probably just one million years, which is only a moment in geological time. The first creature we can legitimately call man-like evolved most probably in Africa near the equator, possibly in the valley of the Omo River in Ethiopia near Lake Rudolph and the Great Rift Valley. Down in the hard baked sludge of two million years ago, the anthropologists found our ancestors, along with the animals he hunted. The animals have not changed to

any great extent over the past two million years, but man has changed dramatically.”

“How come?”

“Let me give you some background. We can safely assume a common ancestor for man, ape, and monkey about fifty million years ago. The lemur, with fingernails instead of claws, opposed thumb, eyes in the front of its head. Man and monkey took divergent paths thirty million years ago. Our records of the intervening millions of years are sketchy until we come to *Australopithecus africanus*, a creature about four feet tall with a brain weighing a pound and a half. He knew how to make a weapon by hammering a rock with another rock until the edge was sharp. He lived in a moist jungle climate. He ate fruits, berries, roots, stalks, and small animals. But then came the challenge. A great and lasting drought, changing the climate, challenging him, stressing him.

“We pick up on him again a million years later. *Homo erectus*. He has spread a long way from Africa. Peking man, found in China. Fossil skulls in Germany. The Neanderthal in the Middle East. He has a three-pound brain, as big as ours today. He is taller. There have been improvements in the structure of his hand, making it better for grasping and better for delicate work. Lots of changes in the brain centers. You understand of course that I use the generic *he*, meaning mankind—men, women, and children. I

yield to no man in my respect for women and my awareness of their equality, but I refuse to corrupt the language with those grotesque mannerisms which began, I believe, with *chairperson*.”

He got up slowly, frowning. He swallowed some of his drink, put the glass down, and began pacing back and forth, four steps forward, four steps aft. He was switching to lecture mode. I have seen him do it before. I cease to be McGee and become Audience. He gathers his thoughts and speaks with care, in rounded sentences, pausing from time to time to look at the Audience.

“Let us try to imagine a day in the life of *Homo erectus* one and a half million years ago, when he is in the middle of those great changes. He is a member of a group. They are roving hunters. They will stay in an area, in shelters they contrive, until food stocks in that area are depleted. His group, his tribe, has begun to accumulate a store of knowledge passed down from generation to generation. Knowledge and myth. He will have been told of and shown the hundreds of different plants and trees which bear some relationship to his survival. Never eat the fruit of this bush. To heal a cut, crush the leaves of this plant and tie them to the wound with a length of vine. He will have to know the characteristic tracks and spoor of hundreds of creatures. To all the information he has been given, he will add the knowledge he has picked up, his



personal storehouse. The only place he can store all the data necessary to survival is in his head.

“Picture him as a member of a hunting party, advancing through scrub land. He will be tense, using every sense, aware of any change in the direction of the breeze. He will be listening, watching, scenting, with hundreds of dangers in his memory banks, thousands of experiences of the hunt in mind. He will have to have learned how to make weapons, learned a crude pharmacology, learned about fire, learned the vulnerability and the danger of many creatures, learned his place in his social order, learned how to fight other men, how to instruct children, how to build shelters. Perhaps, most important of all, he has learned that he will have to keep on learning and remembering or he might die in a very sudden and bloody manner, just as he has seen individuals of his tribe die when they forgot some essential crumb of knowledge.

“This is a demanding life. It is full of stress. And the key to survival is memory! That’s what takes up most of the room in our skulls. Out of memory comes the learning of relationships, and out of that comes creative change, improvements, reductions of risk. And there is a constant selectivity at work. The inattentive child is eaten by wild dogs. The forgetful man is killed by the snake he should have seen. Those dull of wit are overwhelmed by the need to remember so