How A Novelist Turns His Alter Ego To Gold

BY MIKE BAXTER
PHOTOS: TONY GULLIVER

■ The tugboat captain was saying that he'd seen a ghost ship and, in the context, it seemed not only possible but inevitable. The context was Bahia Mar marina in Fort Lauderdale, which on most days has a look-dad-no-cavities gleam. Today the sky was overcast, a movie company was filming a John D. MacDonald mystery on Pier B, and MacDonald arrived on time. But it was the wrong John MacDonald. The search for the right MacDonald led to a nearby hotel bar – and the tugboat captain.

"A couple of weeks ago I read one of those mystery stories," he said. "Travis McGee, it was called. In the book he had this houseboat, the Busted Flush. So this morning we were walking down the pier here. Saw this boat called the Busted Flush. I couldn't believe it. . ."

"Amazing," his friend said.

"And there's this guy going 'shhh' they're making a movie out of it!"

"I'll be damned."

John D. MacDonald, the real MacDonald, was delighted. Told about the tugboat captain, he laughed happily, the laugh of a man who can race typewriters and adding machines with equal speed. By the same time the next day, after a long wait for MacDonald, going "shhh" seemed a good idea. MacDonald, however, roared at malicious intervals.

There were more roars as Australian actor Rod Taylor jack-in-the-boxed out of a small Starcraft trailer on to the pier. He and MacDonald exchanged polite bellows.

"Hi, John, how's my man?" The rugged Aussie face concealed any dismay at MacDonald's larger entourage. Taylor had only his bodyguard, paid to protect the star from his public.

"I'm taking over now," Taylor boomed. "He's my responsibility."

"At last, they'll no longer confuse me with him," MacDonald said. "Now you'll be McGee and I'll be MacDonald."

"Him" was Travis McGee, a creation of MacDonald's fiction, master of the Busted Flush, and holder of the producers' $2-million stakes in the box-office sweepstakes. To watch Taylor and MacDonald was to witness a ceremony of exorcism. With each forward frame of 35mm film the Aeroflex cameras of Cinema

John MacDonald, (above) on location in Fort Lauderdale with actor Rod Taylor for the filming of "Darker Than Amber," says he "enjoys the hell out of writing because of the rare times when it really works good."

John MacDonald is making a fortune from Travis McGee's fictional adventures

Center Studios were stripping the fantasy figure of McGee from MacDonald and his books, and cloaking it around the wedge-shaped and willing shoulders of Taylor.

When the movie, *Darker Than Amber*, makes its M-rated debut next year, both Taylor and millions of Mature Audience voyeurs can be McGee, for all MacDonald professes to care. "I hate to disappoint people," he said, and laughed easily and loudly, the sound like gravel rattling on cardboard. The writer known to friends as "John D" was in a sportive mood.

"I hope they make a dozen of them," he said, watching Taylor, Jane Russell and lesser names with greater talents – Theodore Bikel, for one – turn *Amber* into gold. Movie rights are earning a "sizeable five-figure sum" and a box-office percentage, and he has also sold options on the other McGee books at pyramiding rates.

This alone should forgive him his excesses. "It so happens, man, I stay pretty loose," he said as he arrived at Bahia Mar, and he certainly looked loose enough in a pastiche of Miami Beach styles: Swedish nautical cap, canary slacks, a rose-bowled pipe propped in the corner of a grin, dark glasses despite the overcast day.

It was as if something in him were reluctant to surrender the role of McGee's alter ego. But despite innate acting talent, he never succeeded at making the role seem reality. A MacDonald friend later dismissed his costume and role-playing as protective coloration for a sensitive man facing the Cinemascope egos at Bahia Mar.

McGee was born in 1964 as a full-grown 6-foot-4, 212-pound freelance adventurer. In five hectic years, he has piloted the Busted Flush through Gulf and Gold Coast waters and 11 best-selling paperbacks. Gifted with a Rod Taylor physique and a John MacDonald intellect, McGee salvages private property in extra-legal situations for half its value which, he tells Victims of Injustice, is better than nothing. For both of them. But sometimes, a rampant sentimentalist, he forgives the fee. In a McGee book, the victim is usually attractive.

Unlike McGee, whose self-expressions are physical and often pontifical, the six-feet-nothing MacDonald just writes: books, magazine articles, short stories. Anything, it seems, but a bad check. In five years he has written McGee into third place behind Perry Mason and Mike Hammer in the suspense league, and third place is still big money.

MacDonald was a struggling lieutenant colonel in the Office of Strategic Services, nearly 30, when he sold his first story. That was 59 novels and 37 million readers ago. Except for the Bible, there is not much left to catch up with. With prudish disavowal of its literary importance, MacDonald produced a clipping that said only four living authors have outsold Fawcett Publications' "paperback king."

MacDonald writes on a beige IBM Selectric as if Doom were about to unplug it in the last great denouement. A MacDonald week in his adopted home town of Sarasota has three fixed points: the Plaza for lunch Friday, his color television set on "Mission: Impossible" nights, and the Selectric. He devotes a business-like seven-to-nine hours a day writing, doing it until the lunch hour, then doing it again until the cocktail hour. Fast subtraction shows that this leaves "too little time, dammit" for other pursuits.

Travis McGee's debut in *The Dark Blue Goodbye*, first of a rainbow of titles, was hailed by *Saturday Review* as "a publishing event." The late Ian Fleming, creator of James Bond, automatically bought each new McGee as it appeared, high praise in anyone's mystery book.

MacDonald the crime writer "never lets the customer down the *Review* said, choosing the word "customer" with deliberation. The tribute interlocks with an often-echoed MacDonald quote: "I feel that the man who pays 35 cents for your books is as worthy of as much bitter effort as the man who pays $3.50. And he is much more numerous."

In its latest edition that quote was updated to "50 cents" and "5.50" (an increase unequal to inflation. The paperback books today cost 60 to 75 cents).

Yet customers for them are more numerous then ever, with about six cents a copy sold ($75,000 on a million sales) going to MacDonald.

Godot could have been found earlier and easier than MacDonald that day at Bahia Mar. Waiting for him caused embarrassment for every white-haired man of about 53 who wandered near the pier, and constant phone calls to the room of another John MacDonald staying at the Bahia Mar hotel. A call to MacDonald's Sarasota home could have ended the mystery of his arrival time. This suggestion was offered to MacDonald acquaintances on the set. To a man, they shuddered. They spoke of The Writer's privacy and with reverence a movie publicity man had said: "And he does all his own typing.'

Once arrived at Fort Lauderdale, MacDonald shrugged permission to visit him at his eight-month-old hideaway on Siesta Key. He affirmed, however, a fondness for privacy.

Smiling, he described his moat, barracuda, cross-beamed lasers and a wife who patrolled with a Whammo slingshot.

In their place were found only two aging Fords and, on stilts above them, an airy "Early Fish House," design-built big and modern. The house does have an elaborate security system, however, and privacy in a glass-walled house is assured with curtains of outdoor lights turning the glass into one-way mirrors. It is a privacy not even Travis McGee is allowed to violate.

"You know," MacDonald said, "when I originally started the McGee thing, I was apprehensive about that. He could have been based in Sarasota. But if successful it wou'd

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MacDonald is writing his latest McGee novel as a matter of personal pride

have been right in my own backyard. So I put him in Fort Lauderdale.

Before moving in April to his hideaway, MacDonald said, his work was interrupted by a recurring incident: "You'd see some man stop, having an argument with his wife, nod his head, then shuffle up to the house with a couple of books. It'd be immoral not to sign them. Then you chat five minutes, come back and wonder where in hell you were."

He admitted his vanity would be piqued if no one came to interrupt him with praise or questions.

Now, at home, he seemed hesitant to enter immediately a structured question-and-answer interview. He answered calls in his study, lit a pipe, showed color transparencies from a Mexican vacation. Talking about the house and the movie, he became more animated and his manner progressively warmer. The movie-set kibitzer in clothes that would have turned a Brazilian admiral's head was now wearing chino slacks and sleeve-rolled shirt. The guise of hearty beercan-crunching outdoorsman was clearly left far behind in Bahia Mar.

Though he finally resigned himself to answering questions, the longest answers were for questions that were not asked. He began talking about ego and introversion. "I'm an ambivert," he said. His eyes glazed in introspective thought and his gaze swiveled slightly toward the Gulf beyond the veranda. He found the thought he searched for, and looked back. "That's the way I think of myself. A very introverted kid with moments of manic extroversion."

There is also in MacDonald an ambivalency toward sentiment. Few novelists write with his power of violence. And few writers have his weakness for chain letters, for inside jokes (he named an Amber character after his agent) and for pets. Living with the MacDonalds are two half-Abyssinian cats, one cross-eyed, a goose and a duck.

Four years ago MacDonald wrote a book about his life with pets, *The House Guests*. He offered this as the closest book to an autobiography he has written. In it he described the writing of more than 200 manuscripts and 800,000 words between his first and second sales:

"This is the equivalent of 10 average novels. Writing is the classic example of learning by doing. Had I done a novel a year, it would have taken me 10 years to acquire the precision and facility I acquired in four months. I could guess that I spent 80 hours a week at the typewriter. I kept 25 to 30 articles in the mail at all times, sending each of them out to an average of 10 potential markets before retiring them."

The attitude may represent a business background more than the traditional desperation of the starving artist. MacDonald was born on July 24, 1916, the son of Eugene MacDonald, who "was in financial stuff with small corporations" in Sharon, Pa. and Utica, N.Y. John earned a degree in business administration at Syracuse and a master's from the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration. Until he sold his first story in 1946, he had planned a business career. Vestiges of business training appear in his home office.

His study faces the Gulf. Alongside *objets d'art* are *objets d'artiste*. A 60-power Sears telescope through which he can see a neighbor's telescope aimed at him, another inside joke; a Random House dictionary he sometimes finds himself reading for 15 minutes; a Xerox 660 copier used in his voluminous researches; an adding machine, and Travis McGee in the unfinished twelfth manuscript.

Writer MacDonald's artist wife, Dorothy, specializes in painting in blue oils.

He admits that McGee, now rich and famous, may be near retirement.

"I said I'd do 10 when I started," MacDonald said. "I really screwed up *Indigo* (the 11th). So now I'm doing 12 – as a matter of personal pride, to have it real solid. After 12, I'm not going to arbitrarily say again that I won't do anymore. If I come across an idea I think could work into a McGee, I'll do it in some other form. I like to write. I don't want to foul my own nest by turning writing into a dogged chore."

According to MacDonald, McGee is "a separate, entirely distinct individual. He has opinions that are far more black-and-white than mine. In some basic areas I don't agree with him. I think he's flawed in ways I'm not. He has not really accepted the necessities of being a grown-up boy."

"I'm trying to change McGee imperceptibly," MacDonald explained, "in line with what I think would normally happen. But you can run into trouble and change a guy too much."

McGee will never die like Sherlock Holmes; money has bought him that much. "I wouldn't want to accept the commercial stupidity," MacDonald said. "Once he's dead, all the other books become history."

MacDonald can pension McGee off without affecting his workload. While completing McGee No. 12, he is working on three other novels in his unorthodox way, moving from one to another at the first outbreak of boredom.

He writes without outlining, weaving intricate plots and large casts into the empty middle separating a known beginning and a known climax.

He writes on expensive 25-pound bond paper. "I think the same situation is involved as with painting and sculpture. If you use the best materials you can afford, somehow you have more respect for what you do to it."

He seldom edits with pencil. "I rewrite by throwing away a page, a chapter, half a book, or go right back to the beginning and start again."

He is also a happy writer, another unorthodoxy. "I enjoy the hell out of writing," he said, "because of the rare times when it really works good. It's like an Easter egg hunt. Here's 50 pages, and you say, 'Oh, Christ, where is it?' Then on the 51st page, it'll work. Just the way you wanted it to, a little better than anything in that same area ever worked before. You say 'Wow! This is worth the price of admission.' "

His wife of 30 years, Dorothy Prentiss MacDonald is an artist whose predominately blue oils cover much of the house's white-stained cedar walls. While we talked, she emerged from the kitchen with Tuborg and Heineken beers and, for MacDonald, a Bloody Mary.

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which he chased with milk and an untipped Gaulois cigarette. There is a faint but noticeable deference in her attitude towards her husband.

Current magazines litter the coffee table, a backdrop for a thin manuscript and an acceptance letter from *Playboy*. The magazine had just bought "Dear Old Friend," an ironic short story, for $2,000, twice its normal rate. The editor said it was to encourage MacDonald, who once had a study wall papered with rejection slips, to write more for them.

The story had been cubbyholed in a closet filled with other unpublishable material. "I wrote it about four years ago and it didn't work. It was too fancy. I had it lying around, and thought of it sometimes, and last month I did it again and did it real flat."

Flat? "I'm talking about trying to achieve more simplicity, so you give the reader really more of a chance to relate his own emotional climate to what you're writing. I feel like I'm still within my learning period. I haven't flattened out yet."

Like Simenon, Doyle and others, MacDonald is an intellectual, or perhaps a pop-intellectual, who quotes *The Lonely Crowd* and *Games People Play*. But he writes without pandering in a genre that is known more for its surrender-or-die dialogue than Travis McGee's rough eloquence."

Known as "John D." to his friends, MacDonald sported a Swedish nautical cap during the filming of the screen version of his McGee novel.

"Suspense is like a mental exercise," he said. "Once you accept the limits of what you're doing, you try to do the best you can within those limits. And you're not going to be patronizing anybody. The only patronizing for anybody would be the decision to accept those limits."

In a written interview with a French doctoral student, MacDonald invoked examples from Camus to John Updike, dichotomized the Judeo-Christian ethic into a pair of neat dilemmas, and questioned the classifying of "suspense" novels as distinct from "straight" novels.

"If all this sounds as if I am being all too terribly artsy about crime fiction," he wrote, "I ask just one question: How much of the great Faulkner trilogy could be so categorized?"

So MacDonald writes, and Travis McGee rights wrongs. The lingering after-vision from Sarasota is double: the twain shall never meet. McGee, who may be retiring, is not MacDonald, who will never retire. After all, there is still Perry Mason and Mike Hammer. And the Bible. ■

Mike Baxter is a staff writer for The Miami Herald's Tropic magazine.