

THE DEEP BLUE GOOD-BY

Classic Travis McGee tale (as are they all) with lessons and language for the ages

by John D. MacDonald

1964 (renewal 1992), Ballantine Books, 273 pages

For some reason there's a gap in my reading history for John D. MacDonald's fine fiction, especially the hugely popular Travis McGee mystery crime novels. So you can't call me an expert witness in this case, but a friendly one on this his first in the Travis McGee series.

I had read something in the series before—I think it was the Pale Gray one (the Travis McGee titles always contain a color)—but did not remember what an astute judge of character ol' Trav is... and how he teeters so on the edge of cynicism when it comes to sociological observations.

For example, after Travis assesses his soon-to-be client—"The world had done its best to subdue and humble her, but the edge of her good tough spirit showed through."—he launches into a broad internal diatribe on the world as he knows it:

"I am wary of a lot of other things, such as plastic credit cards, payroll deductions, insurance programs, retirement benefits, savings accounts, Green Stamps, time clocks, newspapers, mortgages, sermons, miracle fabrics, deodorants, check lists, time payments, political parties, lending libraries, television actresses, junior chambers of commerce, pageants, progress, and manifest destiny.

"I am weary of the whole dreary deadening structured mess we have built into such a glittering, top-heavy structure that there is nothing left to see but the glitter, and the brute routines of maintaining it."

Travis McGee is a young man, central casting's idea of a lifeguard. He's "retired" on a Lauderdale (Florida) houseboat fixerupper. He takes jobs as he finds them, usually in pursuit of a just cause, any just cause that brings him a 50% finder's (and getter's) fee. In this case, a friend of one of his dancer lady buds wants him to find the man who took money from her daddy and her family.

It boils down to this real sleazeball did time with the girl's father, who was convicted of defrauding the government during the war (WW2) with some logistics scams. The father nonetheless had managed to squirrel away a tidy treasure that he intended to unbury to help his family out after prison. But the father dies in prison. Sleazeball knew him and suspected the treasure, so he ingratiates himself with the family, which includes basically raping our simple client girl and moving on to prey on other women.

Client girl, a dancer from the other side of the tracks, informs Travis she thinks the man found her daddy's treasure. Sleazeball turns from an ordinary redneck, though powerfully built and constantly smiling, into a rich ordinary redneck overnight. The process of Travis tracking and unraveling this prey makes for stimulating reading on a lot of different levels. Trav is full of commentary weaving naturally through the storyline like a stiff breeze through the poplars:

On the nanny and pappy state:

But these are the last remaining years of choice. In the stainless nurseries of the future, the feds will work their way through all the squalling pinkness tattooing a combination tax number and credit number on one wrist, followed closely by the I.T. and T. team putting the permanent phone number, visaphone doubtless, on the other wrist. Die and your number goes back in the bank. It will be the first provable immortality the world has ever known. — Page 104

On the business syndrome:

He hesitated. It was the business syndrome. He had something somebody else wanted and he had to stop for a moment to consider what advantage might be gained. This reflex brought him all the way back from the jungly old war in the back alcove of memory, where he was Lieutenant Callowell, agile, quick, and very concerned about the ways of hiding and controlling the fear he felt every day. He fell back into the portly disguise of William Callowell, cushioned with money and authority, shrewd builder and bidder, perhaps privately worried about impotence, audits, and heart attacks. — Page 113

A flavor of importance:

I wanted to take her on her basis readying her as graciously as she had made herself ready, with an unhurried homage to all her parts and purposes, an intimate minuet involving offer and response,

demand and delay, until the time when it would all be affirmed and taken and done with what, for want of a better name, must be called a flavor of importance. — Page 161

The massive output of the government schools:

We hold the dream in front of them like a carrot, and finally say sorry you can't have any. And the schools where we teach them non-survival are gloriously architected. They will never live in places so fine, unless they contract something incurable. — Page 192

Harsh observation of a fallen woman:

But in this cruelty of sunlight, in this, her twentieth year, she was a record of everything she had let them do to her. Too many trips to too many storerooms had worn the bloom away. The freshness had been romped out, in sweat and excess. The body reflects the casual abrasions of the spirit, so that now she could slump in her meaty indifference, as immunized to tenderness as a whore at a clinic. — Page 201

I don't need to tell you John D. MacDonald is a master of the language. Indeed, I'm hoping by so extensively quoting I'm not violating any copyright laws; but these passages are my homage and a small fraction of his Pulitzer Prizeworthy literature. I'm absolutely thrilled I've only just started my journey into the 20+ books of the Travis McGee series (and another 40 or so novels (!), which include Cape Fear).

Further, the plot is architected like a Swiss watch and the FOT (friends of Travis) characters are so believable and so humanely drawn that you don't want to finish the book and let them go. (Kind of like Jim Rockford, his dad Rocky, Angel, attorney Beth Davenport, and Lt. Dennis... for those of us who lived and loved The Rockford Files.)

Reading the McGee series, I now recognize I'm in the presence of greatness, a beacon to the soul of a country that seems to have lost its way—helping us all get back where we belong.

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