

# The Drink Tank

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**-Editors-**

**Alissa Wales, Chuck Serface, Chris Garcia**

# Robert McGinnis

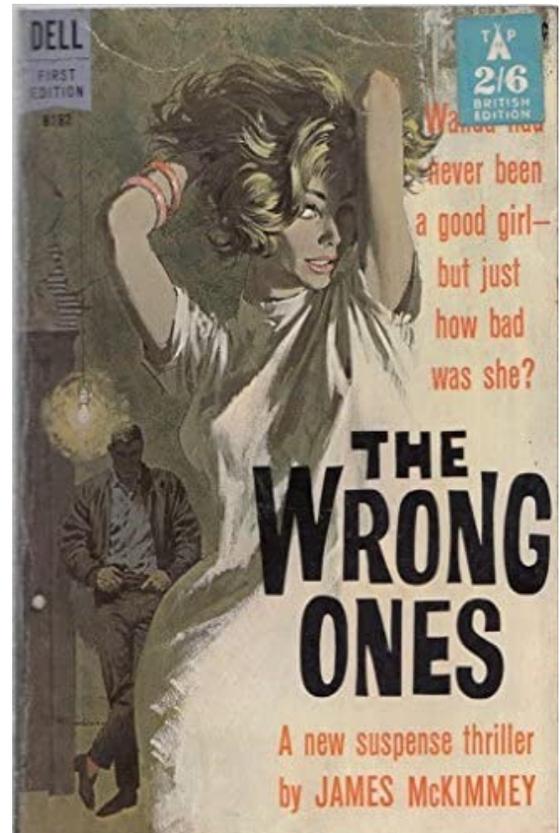
By Chris Garcia

**My visual language for crime fiction** is informed through three things – the films of the 1940s and 50s, the language of the pulps, and the cover images of Robert McGinnis.

McGinnis first came to my attention before I ever had an idea that the guy had a name. The James Bond movie posters of the late 1960s through the early 1980s had McGinnis art, and they were instantly recognizable. The posters for *Diamonds are Forever* and *Live and Let Die* are the top posters of the entire series, as far as I'm concerned. His other works, like *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Barbarella* are equally as iconic. These images made even a young me notice as I encountered them as VHS covers.

When I started reading mid-century crime fiction, and particularly those that were published, or re-published, by Hard Case Crime, I knew the art style and I could finally put a name to it.

The covers that I remember as a kid were from books either Dad had around or that I came across in old bookstores. The first one that comes to mind is *The Wrong Ones*. I sought it out a few years ago after remembering that cover from Dad's books. It was nothing special, save for that cover. It's a beautiful woman taking up more than half the cover, with a seemingly crest-fallen man in a chair in the distance. Nearly the entire right-hand side of the page seems to be blank canvas, like a Gilbert Stuart president. While she's fully clothed, in fact



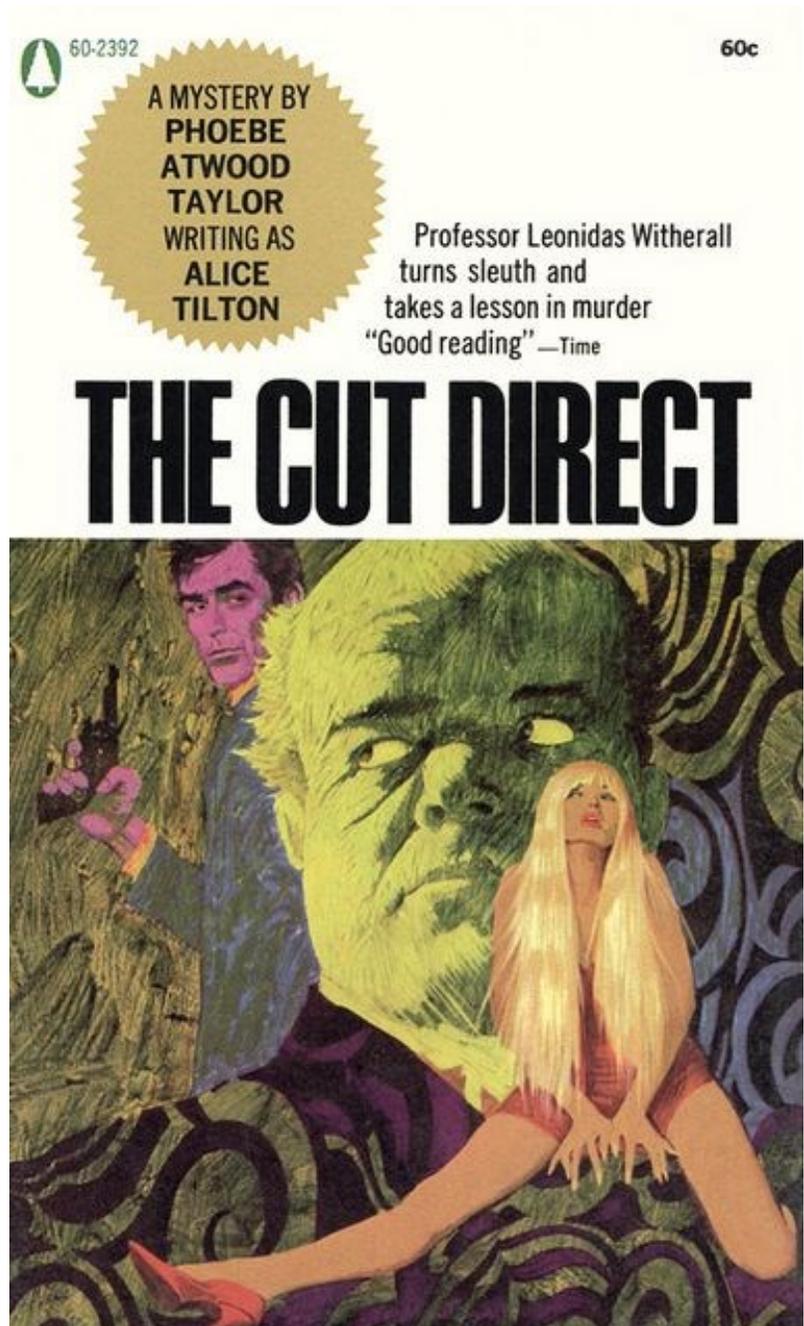
she's wearing a somewhat drape-y dress up to her neck, she is undeniably sexy. It's an incredible cover, and one that you can't go wrong with.

*Lie Down, Killer* is a novel that is 100% worth searching out. Richard S. Prather is an amazing writer, and here, in 1952, Prather is delivering a story that just flattens out. The cover is arguably the most seductive I'd ever seen, and it was one that I've seen semi-replicated by many other cover artists. The work itself may be one of his most seductive. Her dark rimmed eyes are incredibly drawing.

No one does showgirls better than McGinnis, and the cover for Mickey Spillane's *Killer Mine I Murder is the Message*, a Carter Brown book, or *The Peddler* by Richard S. Prather, that we see what he does so well with the idea of the showgirl even when she's not specifically the showgirl. There's an implied nakedness to these, and it's a classic aspect of McGinnis' work.

Perhaps my favorite of his covers is a Phoebe Atwood Taylor novel, *The Cut Direct*. It's a bit psychedelic, but it's also incredibly cinematic, which shouldn't be a shock as he's a movie poster artist and one of the best. The woman on the cover isn't the most dominant of the figures. There's a pug-nosed man shaded green who is peering over her but looking away. The effect is completely unreal, and the semi-paisley background only helps set it far off into the unreal.

Robert McGinnis is still with us, 96 years old as I write this, and is arguably the greatest living paperback cover artist, and the last working cover artist of the Golden Age of the 1950s and 60s.





# G-Man Jerry Cotton: The All-American Crime Fighter from West Germany

by Cora Buhlert

**There is an urban legend** that in the 1950s and 1960s, the regional FBI office in New York City was so inundated with letters from West Germany addressed to a certain G-Man Jerry Cotton that they felt the need to print a form letter stating that there was no agent named Jerry Cotton at the FBI office in New York City. Variations of this legend even claim that the form letters were signed by none other than J. Edgar Hoover himself, which seems unlikely, since Hoover must surely have had more important things to do than reply to letters sent to a non-existing agent.

But who is Jerry Cotton? The case was clearly too difficult for the FBI to crack, though a look at any West German newsstand would have provided the answer. For Jerry Cotton is a fictional character, hero of a series of weekly dime novels that have been published continuously since 1954.

Dime novels and pulp magazines died out in the US after World War II, but in Germany they persist to this day in the form of the so-called *romanheft*. During their heyday from the 1950s to 1970s, a bewildering variety of these A5-sized 64-page magazines with pulp paper interiors and glossy covers could be found at any newsstand, tobacco shop, or grocery store, though their popularity has somewhat faded by now.

The bestselling *romanheft* genres by far are romance and western, though science fiction (the long-running *Perry Rhodan* series is a *romanheft* line), horror and mystery/crime fiction are also popular.

Germans love mysteries and crime novels, so the fact that crime and mystery *romanhefte* sell well should be no surprise. However, German crime fiction and film took a big hit during the Third Reich, because the Nazis intensely disliked the crime genre for its tendency to paint a less than rosy picture of life in 1930s Germany. Plus, the genre tended to get a little too political for comfort. Hence, both crime fiction and films came under intense scrutiny by Nazi censors and gradually vanished from bookshelves and screens altogether.

After 1945, it took some time for the crime genre to bounce back. Translations of British and American and to a lesser degree French and Italian mysteries and crime novels quickly reappeared on bookstore shelves, but pre-war crime novels by German authors were

not reprinted to the same degree. In cinemas and the nascent medium of television, the situation was similar. Foreign crime movies filled screens and theatre seats, but hardly any crime movies were made in West (and East, for the matter) Germany until the late 1950s, supposedly because a population traumatised by World War II preferred lighter fare such as romances, musicals, comedies, and melodramas.

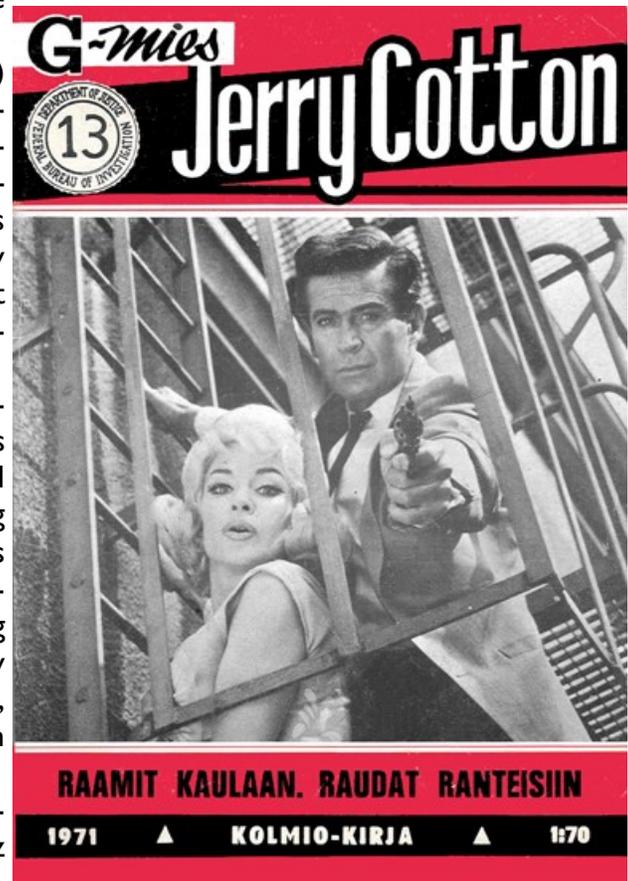
Romanhefte quickly reappeared on West German newsstands after World War II, often as reprints or continuations of popular pre-war western, adventure, and romance lines. The romanheft was also where West German crime fiction found a home, albeit often disguising itself as British or American crime fiction, because by now German audiences had been trained to view mystery and crime fiction as a British and American genre, which made stories with German settings and characters a hard sell, an issue which persisted until the regional crime fiction movement took off in the 1970s and 1980s.

This is the climate into which *G-Man Jerry Cotton* was born, bursting onto the scene in 1954 in issue 68 of the anthology series *Bastei Kriminalroman* (Bastei Crime Novel), entitled "*Ich suchte den Gangster-Chef*" ("I Sought the Gangster Boss"). The story proved to be popular and so the character quickly became a regular feature in *Bastei Kriminalroman*. In 1956 finally, Jerry Cotton received his own *Romanheft* series *G-Man Jerry Cotton*, which continues to this day. As of this writing, issue 3406 entitled "Kidnapped!" is at the newsstands.

The *Jerry Cotton* stories were (and continue to be) written in first person point-of-view in the style of the American hardboiled crime novel. As was common with romanhefte in the 1950s, the author was not credited and the first-person narration created the illusion that the story was penned by a real FBI agent, which also explains why so many readers assumed that Jerry Cotton was a real person that they flooded the FBI office in New York City with letters addressed to him.

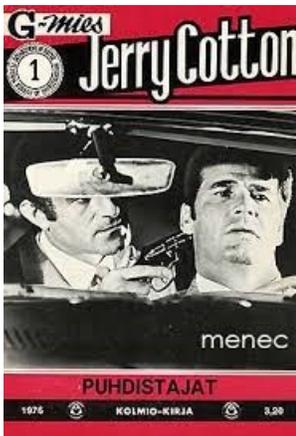
Even as other *romanheft* lines began crediting the authors, the *Jerry Cotton* authors always remained anonymous and the creator of the character remained unknown until 1998, when he was revealed as Delfried Kaufmann, a washing powder salesman and aspiring author. Kaufmann was 31 years old, when he created Jerry Cotton, initially intended as a parody of American hardboiled crime novels. He stopped writing the regular series after a few issues but was occasionally brought back for special anniversary issues. Fiercely private, Kaufmann rarely responded to interview requests. He died in 2015, aged 92.

His creation, meanwhile, lived on in the hands of other authors, including well-known *romanheft* writers like Heinz



-Werner Höber, Horst Friedrichs, Wolfgang Hohlbein, Helmut Rellergerd, and C.H. Günther. Jerry Cotton's adventures have been translated into nineteen languages and appeared more than fifty countries. By the mid-1970s, the total height of all *Jerry Cotton* magazines stacked up theoretically exceeded the height of Mount Everest. For the fiftieth anniversary in 2004, the total print run in Germany alone was estimated to be about 850 million magazines. According to a study from the 1970s, each 64-page magazine is read by approximately eight people, so the total number of *Jerry Cotton* readers theoretically outnumbers the world population.

These numbers are staggering. Along with space hero Perry Rhodan, Jerry Cotton is the best known and most iconic German pulp character. Publisher Gustav Lübbe once called Cotton "the only character of international importance in German post-war literature." This is an exaggeration, but nonetheless, Jerry Cotton is a household name. In a survey conducted among recruits of the West German Army in 1970, eighty percent of those questioned knew not only the name of Jerry Cotton but that of his partner Phil Decker as well. In the same survey it was found that seventy percent of the recruits did not know the name of West German president Gustav Heinemann.



But who is Jerry Cotton? According to the magazines, he was born in Harpersville, a small town in Connecticut. His full name is Jeremias Cotton, but he hates his first name which was given to him by an overly religious aunt. Physical descriptions of Cotton are vague, all we know is that he is tall, broad-shouldered and has dark hair. In the early years, Cotton's weapon of choice was a .38 Smith and Wesson revolver, before he switched to a Sig Sauer P226 automatic in 1999. Jerry Cotton's other famous accessory is his red Jaguar. The model has changed over the years (currently it's a Jaguar XKR convertible), but colour and brand always remain the same, even though Jaguars are quite uncommon in the US.

In his early twenties, Cotton went to New York City to make his fortune. He became embroiled in a criminal operation and was rescued by John D. High, head of the local FBI office. Mr. High took young Jerry under his wing and persuaded him to join the FBI. Over the years, Cotton and High (who lost his own family during a bank robbery gone wrong) have developed something like a father and son relationship.

Jerry Cotton used to smoke when it was still politically correct. He likes a good whiskey, but his alcohol consumption has declined in recent years. Jerry also likes to admire the female form (there are many references to "full breasts," "shapely hips," and the like), though he generally keeps away from romantic entanglements. In the early years of the series, the writers were explicitly forbidden to include romance and/or sex in the stories. By now, this rule has been somewhat relaxed. Nonetheless, Jerry prefers to remain single and what few serious relationships he had inevitably ended tragically with the death of the lady in question.

Jerry Cotton's partner and best friend is Phil Decker. Blonde and somewhat shorter than Cotton, Decker was born in Detroit and studied medicine in Harvard. During a trip to Chicago, he witnessed a robbery and decided to dedicate his life to fighting crime instead. Unlike the rather celibate Cotton, Decker is something of a ladies' man. Phil Decker is the Watson to Jerry Cotton's Holmes, intelligent but not quite as intelligent, heroic but not quite as heroic as Cotton himself.

out for reprints. Left-wing critics have accused the series of racism, though in my opinion the racism in *Jerry Cotton* is no worse than what can be found in many American and British pulps of the same period. But then, the popularity of *Jerry Cotton* made the series a favourite target for all those attacking *romanhefte* in general. And so, *Jerry Cotton* was alternately accused of glorifying violence and crime, being overly focussed on law and order and promoting the death penalty. Marxist literary critic Gerhard Bierwirth even went as far as to call *Jerry Cotton* "an act of violence against the reader" and claim that the series was as addictive as a drug.

The *Jerry Cotton* series reflects post-war West Germany's idea of America more than anything else. Particularly in the early years, most of the authors had never actually visited the US and their only research was a street map of New York City provided by the publisher *Bastei-Lübbe*. That said, many *Jerry Cotton* authors did take their research seriously. Long-time author Horst Friedrichs visited New York City in 1973, rode along in the back of a police car and was even given a tour of the FBI headquarters in Quantico, Virginia.

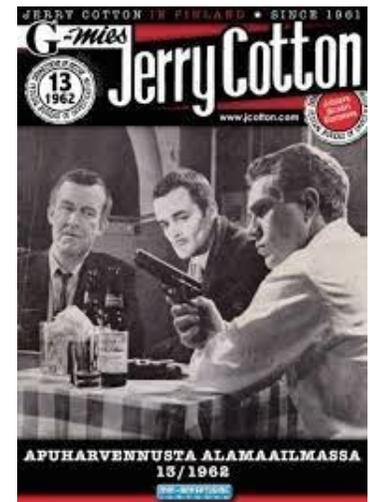
In many ways, *Jerry Cotton*'s New York City seems permanently stuck in the prohibition era, even if the G-men and gangsters are using computers now. However, the real world did invade the *Jerry Cotton* series over the years. And so, *Jerry Cotton* has dealt with psychotic war veterans, a drug gang which used the bodies of US soldiers killed in Vietnam to smuggle heroin or eco-terrorists threatening to poison Manhattan with dioxin. In recent years, *Jerry Cotton* has battled Al-Qaeda, while Phil Decker almost succumbed to an anthrax attack. The September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks were also reflected in the series and stories published in the early 2000s often have Jerry gazing up at the Manhattan skyline and musing about the hole where the World Trade Center towers should be.

*Jerry Cotton*'s popularity floundered in the 1990s, when the print run of the magazine dropped from 250,000 to 100,000 and the publisher even considered cancelling the series. In an era, where the public perception of the FBI was characterised by *X-Files* style paranoia on the one hand and the cool professionalism of *Criminal Minds* and similar TV-shows on the other hand, the simple adventures of a two-fisted G-Man did seem a little old-fashioned.

Though *Jerry Cotton* did bounce back and appeared in a successful series of audio dramas featuring well-known German voice actors. In 2010, there even was a new *Jerry Cotton* movie starring Christian Tramitz as Jerry and Christian Ulmen as Phil Decker, though it never achieved the success of the 1960s movies.

In 2012 finally, a reboot series entitled *Cotton Reloaded* appeared. Many details were updated for the twenty-first century. *Jerry Cotton* is now a 09-11 survivor who lost his parents and sister in the attacks on the World Trade Center, which inspires him to join the FBI. Jerry's partner is still Phil Decker, only that Phil is now a woman whose full name is Philippa. *Cotton Reloaded* lasted for 61 issues and was cancelled in 2018.

Meanwhile, the original *G-Man Jerry Cotton* series has lasted for almost seventy years now, while all his competitors were cancelled long ago. For while there is crime, *Jerry Cotton* and Phil Decker will be there to fight it.



In 1965, Jerry Cotton finally acquired a face. And that face belonged to a genuine Hollywood actor, George Nader. Between 1965 and 1969, Nader played Jerry Cotton in eight movies, beginning with *Schüsse aus dem Geigenkasten* (Operation Hurricane). Phil Decker was played by German actor Heinz Weiss, best remembered for his role in the long running TV-series *Traumschiff* (Dreamboat).

In Hollywood, Nader had never been a well-known actor, appearing mostly in B-movies such as 1953's *Robot Monster*. He left the US, when he was about to be outed as gay. The *Jerry Cotton* films made him a star in Germany. When George Nader went on a promo tour through West Germany, fan hysteria reached levels comparable to the chaos accompanying boy band concerts today. Even after the end of the film series, Nader remained more popular in Germany than in his native country. His death in 2002 was largely ignored in the USA, yet many German papers ran obituaries for him.

The *Jerry Cotton* films were entirely shot in West Germany, using a combination of stock footage and "American looking" locations to create the illusion of taking place in the US. And so high-rise housing estates doubled for Manhattan and a German sandpit stood in for the Arizona desert. The results range from the highly effective to the unintentionally hilarious. Bloopers such as German language signs and posters in the background are common. Nonetheless, these films hold up surprisingly well today, more than fifty years after they were made. Particularly, the first four movies, shot in atmospheric black and white, have a stylish noir look, and the quirky and catchy theme tune by Peter Thomas has become a jazz classic.

In their relentless battle against organised crime, Jerry Cotton, Phil Decker, and Mr High are joined by a varying cast of other FBI operatives. In the early years, the supporting characters were mostly white and male – Mr. High's secretary Helen was the only female character. But as times changed, the supporting cast became much more diverse and now includes several women as well as characters of color.



The most notable supporting character is Zeerokah, a G-man of indigenous origin. Zeerokah has been a part of the series since the early days, probably because German readers of the 1950s expected indigenous characters to appear in any novel set in the US, regardless of genre (and indeed some early *Jerry Cotton* issues had western type plots). What makes Zeerokah unusual is that he managed to escape the blatant stereotyping that afflicted many other indigenous characters of the period and is known as much for his passion for designer suits as for his ethnicity.

In general, *Jerry Cotton* has always shown a multicultural New York City. From the very beginning, the series has featured Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Indigenous characters. Alas, many of these characters were heavily stereotyped and often portrayed as villains. Racial slurs also occasionally appeared in the early issues and had to be edited



# Roger Rabbit – Better on Film

by Christopher J. Garcia

**I have never forgotten the first time** I saw *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* It was at my friend Amy's birthday, sitting between two young women, among the most beautiful I'd ever seen at that point, and the popcorn had been comped by our friend who worked at the Century 21 theater. The movie itself was magical. The combination of animation and live-action wasn't exactly new, I remembered having seen Gene Kelly dancing with Jerry the Mouse on *Dialing-for-Dollars*, and even then, I saw fun animations all the time at cons and the like.

But this was different.

The tone was different, the setting was different. It wasn't about making a cartoon of frivolity, but one that introduced the dark side of the frivolity. It was neo-noir, in a way, but also a pastiche. It wasn't about making a good mystery, but about the over-the-top, about everything taken to the extreme. You could pull any character, hold it up to the light like a precious jewel, and you'd see exactly how the facets were cut unambiguously from their source material. Roger Rabbit was the most toon Toon you could have, a perfect combination of Wile E. Coyote and Bugs Bunny, with a hint of Daffy Duck. There was Jessica Rabbit, drawn with every intention of being a cartoon sex symbol, positively dripping across every scene she's in, the femme fatale made celluloid. There was Eddie Valiant, our detective played by Bob Hoskins. He was Lemmy Caution, Sam Spade, and Philip Marlowe rolled into one trench coat and topped with a fedora. The city of Toontown was the Hollywood we all see in our dreams; the Hollywood it shows was one that refused to play to type – neither gritty nor oily from the maintenance of the squeaky-clean image. All turned up to 11, and then passed through a low-pass filter to make it a Disney property. And all of that is what the book was missing.

I finally read *Who Censored Roger Rabbit*, well I listened to it, and the differences between the two were massive, and I think the idea of Roger Rabbit as a character is best-served by film instead of in writing.

The book focuses on Eddie Valiant, a private dick who is hired by Roger to help him get his own strip. He's been playing second-fiddle to Baby Herman in a comic strip, and the Degreasy brothers had promised him his own strip. Roger's wife Jessica, the femme fatale of the piece, is on the outs with Roger, and when Roger is found dead, she's Eddie's number one suspect. The investigation is standard, right out of a traditional mystery thriller.

Now, the novel takes place in 1980, or so, and it's based in the world of comic strips, which makes for some fun fantastical elements, like the word bubbles that pop up when Toons speak. The Toons can make doppelgängers, semi-

corporeal versions of themselves, who end up doing the stunt work like running into holes painted on the wall. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* takes place in the Hollywood of 1947, and that is so much more apt for a film and allows for a much richer experience. Yeah, the word balloons would have been a fun gimmick, but movies make way more sense, as does the era switch. Putting the action in the 1950s makes it a lot more based in noir than the book, and at the same time, it allows for the integration of of-the-moment cartoon characters. That's a key to giving a good visual language. The removal of the doppelgänger made the movie a lot more interesting because it made it necessary to create a weakness for the Toons, and that led to the Dip. The biggest difference is that Roger is the murder victim in the novel. That doesn't help with the possibility of a sequel (though Gary K. Wolf did manage such) but it allows for a more realistic Noir experience. The doppelgänger was a neat idea, and did add an element of ticking-clock, but having the actual character along with the detective felt much more natural.

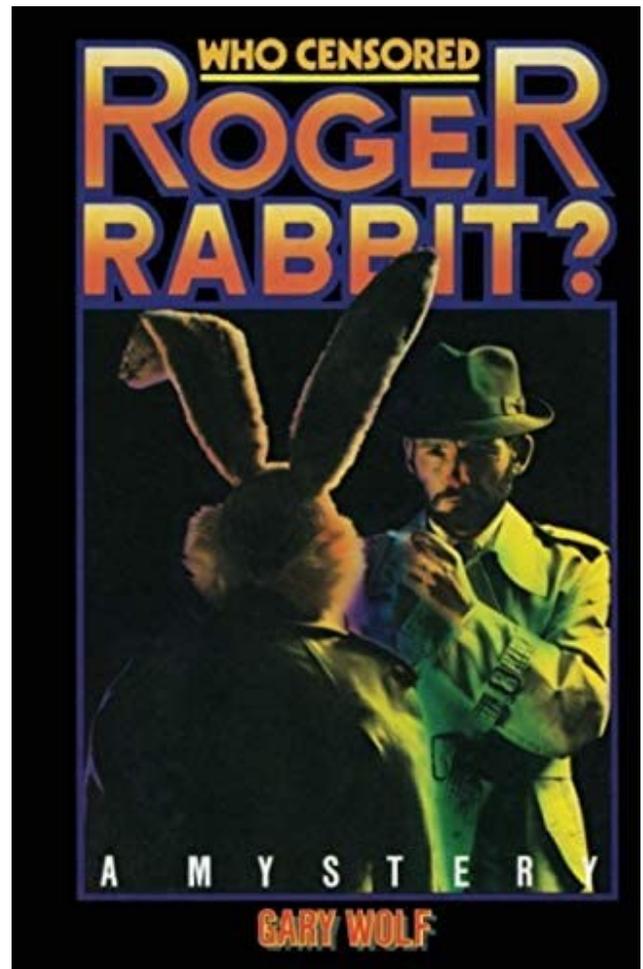
It's odd to say that a movie feels more natural.

The film has characters that became necessary once you got rid of the more fantastical elements of being a Toon. The first was a singular, clear villain, and that was a brilliant opportunity for the casting of Christopher Lloyd as Judge Doom, and that allowed for all sorts of fun. His performance is just about perfect, both pushing the boundaries of sensibility, and then leaning-in when the role calls for it.

The addition of Joanna Cassidy as Delores is another aspect. It's the female foil for the private dick that really helps make it feel even more appropriate for a neo-noir. She's wonderful and hits every note for the role. I've always loved her work, but here she's a perfect 1947 diner waitress.

These are both crime works, both are post-modernist in a deep sense, but the film uses period reference that to give a fuller idea of a detective film, while the book is more about tone. There's a tongue-in-cheekness to the book at times, but it's also a serious work of detective fiction. The movie is more about being in the time, and the mystery is much more convoluted, and that's a good thing, because it speaks to the kind of work you see in films like *The Big Sleep*, and that only makes you think more.

I liked them both a lot, and when the novel gets deeper into the fantastical, it comes very close to the power of the movie, but it's hard to come close to such a masterpiece.





# Seishi Yokomizo: the Oldest Best New Crime Writer

## by Helena McCallum

*(I beg leave of you to allow me to cheat as most of this series of 77 books was published between 1950 and 1980)*

**I have always been a huge fan** of Golden Age crime, so when I heard of a new series of classic crime books being published, I was immediately interested. A fiendish locked room mystery? A plot of twists and turns but still plays to the rules of giving the reader the clues? Please, sign me up! So that is how I discovered that in Japan there is a whole culture of this, called *Honkaku*, and the greatest of these writers was *Seishi Yokomizo*.

The lack of translation into English was a mystery to Pushkin Press, the publisher who took the gamble on the translation of the first novel *The Honjin Murders*. *After all, this writer was famous in Japan, and the book had won the best crime award when it was published in 1946. It amused me that, thanks to the excellent translation by Louise Heal Kawai, it was also nominated as one The Guardian's best new crime novels . . . of 2019.*

It was the night after a grand wedding between their son and an intelligent, modern young woman when the Ichiyanagi family were awakened by eerie music and a terrifying scream.

The young couple are dead in their bed, the snow outside is untouched, apart from a samurai sword implanted in the ground. No one could solve this fiendish case, no one, except the genius, Kosuke Kindaichi.

Kindaichi cuts an unlikely crime solving figure, in his scruffy clothes and questionable appearance, but his ability is renowned. His problem-solving style, with the help of the omniscient translator, its to find out WHY a murder might have occurred, not just how, which throws you deep into Japanese culture at a time of great social upheaval. They are set in about the 1930s, the old ways are passing, a new culture is emerging, with more influence from the West, and it is at this cusp where these books find the mysteries that need to be solved.

I would love to hear your response. I am, on social media everywhere as Adela Terrell.



# The Cadfael Chronicles by Ellis Peters

## by Chris Garcia

**I remember the covers.** I bought a couple of the Ellis Peters books in the 90s. They had the most beautiful covers. They were part stained glass and colorful woodcut-looking covers. I never read one, but I admired them greatly. As we prepared for this issue, I finally had a good reason to read them.

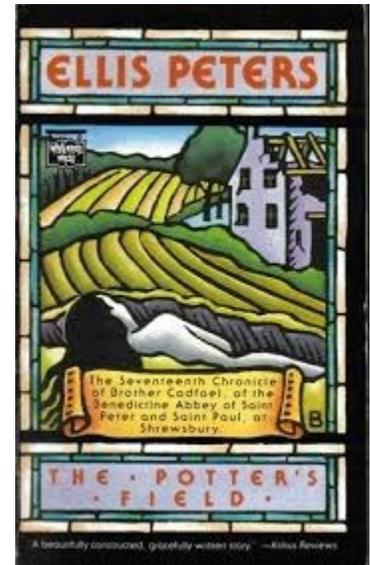
So, of course, I went to *Audible*.

The home of audiobooks and full-cast dramas, I found that the *Cadfael* books were there, with Derek Jacobi reading them! He had played Cadfael on the television series, and thus he obviously knew the character. The audiobooks had originally been Books-on-Tape, and they had been collected and re-released in the last few years after a re-mastering. They sound great, but really, it's the stories, and even more really, it's the performance that sets them apart.

Brother Cadfael is a monk. A Welsh monk at the Abbey Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. He's an herbalist, and he finds himself entangled in mysteries. This makes Cadfael more like Jessica Fletcher of *Murder, She Wrote* than Sherlock Holmes, but it also means that he's smarter than your average twelfth-century monk.

The parallels to Holmes are interesting, though. Cadfael is, more or less, a consulting detective who sometimes ruffles the feathers of the local authorities. He's smarter than them, and nothing seems to escape his notice. He often defends those who would seem to obviously be the criminal to the traditional authorities, and in the end, he turns out right. He's got a past, including a grown son and has loved and lost, but mostly, he's a tip-top monk. Honestly, he's kinda the abbey medical examiner, which would make it more *Quincy* than *Sherlock*, but I'm not sure *Quincy* had come on air yet!

It's really the setting that is so perfect. It's one of the most tumultuous periods of the history of the Britons, the anarchy of the twelfth century. This was the fight between King Stephen and Empress Maud. This



makes for intrigue as the Welsh were, at the same time embroiled in a bunch of disputes and a bit of anarchy in their own right. It's a wonderful time, and Peters obviously had a handle on how to make it into bite-sized pieces that can not only be grasped by the reader but tied directly into the mysteries that Cadfael is required to solve.

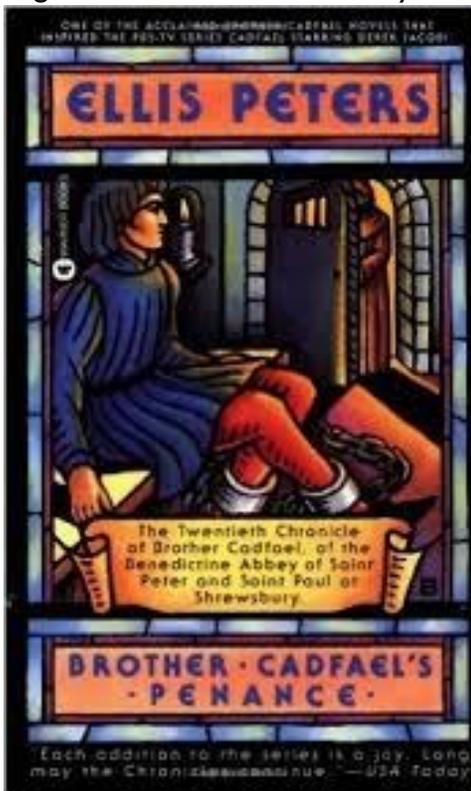
Which brings me to the great trick Peters plays on us all – the language. How the characters talk is not true to the time, how could it be and still be understandable to today's – well, 1970s through 1990s readers -- without a translation guide. Instead, it's all presented in a form that modern readers can take in easily, but that the same time with twinges of archaic dialogue that feel as if they should be right. That's a trick that takes a deep understanding not only of the language of the time, which makes sense as Peters was a linguist, but of the expectations of the reader in the present. The thing that she is perfect at is the hierarchical interactions between the various members of the cast, as it were. Cadfael holds a somewhat special place, but he works to present himself a certain way, with certain forms of not only address, but understanding. He's allowed some leeway because he's obviously the most important of all the monks, but he gets the diplomacy in a way that some just flat don't. This may be why he serves as a diplomat later in the series.

The ones I read on *Audible* weren't consecutive, nor were they the first, but jumping in was easy because each feel like an episode of *Murder, She Wrote*. You know what's going on from the get-go, and really, if it was just a story about abbey life, you'd have the same take-up speed. They're self-contained, and there's always enough hinting that you don't need to have A before you get to B.

The final *Cadfael* story is in the *Audible* collection, and it's good. It may not wrap everything up in a neat little bow, but it does give closure, exposure, and most of all, an ending that feels like an ending without feeling like a funeral. Too often, a character is killed off to justify closing the series out, and here, it's both more and less than that.

Jacobi is, of course, the highlight. He understands Cadfael and how to interpret him better than anyone, but he also imbues the other characters not only with suitable emotional content, but with a not-emotive motivation that seems to carry from deep within. Every character not only feels different, but to come from a different part of the motivating power of the human spirit. I love that.

All in all, these are stories that are wonderful presented in a form that is wonderful, and you should get at them!





# Villains and Cautionary Tales: The Moral of the Story

## by Joe Price

"I got a story ain't got no moral,  
Let the Bad Guy win every once in a while."  
-- Billy Preston

**Throughout the history of fiction** in general and film in particular, there has been the old familiar template of setting, conflict, resolution and happy ending. Just enough of a disruption in the lives of the story characters that a solution to the conflict brings a relief to the characters (and viewer) that all is right with the world. Or is it?

Film Noir in cinema, much as in pulp stories back in the day, are not so constricted by happy endings.

Although we see fine examples of such cautionary tales from the earliest part of the twentieth century (and well before) to most recent times, the years of the 1950s to the early 2000s play a significant part in the development of crime fiction in movies, that period not long after World War 2 and ending around the time of 9/11. Whether the protagonist of the story serves as the villain or the antagonist rival does, such examples may have never been more plentiful in stories with resolutions not constricted to “happy endings.”

Early examples of the “bad guy” protagonist include James Cagney in *Public Enemy*, Paul Muni in *Scarface* and Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar*. But a more recent example would be found in Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing*. Sterling Hayden plays a ring-leader of a group of ne'er do wells who plan to rob a racetrack of millions of dollars in winnings. As his character, Johnny Clay, is front-and-center in the story, his character is the focus and we, the audience, are under suspense as to whether he will get away with the heist and its windfall. We may even hope he gets away with it to some degree; will we be disappointed if he fails? “Should” he? Even the audience may be left in a moral quandary.

A more sinister example may be Robert Mitchum in *Night of the Hunter*. As the maniacal killer Rev. Harry Powell, Robert Mitchum's character uses his leverage from the pulpit to track down bank money to an unsuspecting country widow, played by Shelley Winters, and her two untrusting children who are unknowingly carrying the stolen loot with them. An ensuing chase through the vast farmland has a murderous Reverend Powell chasing the two kids along a large river until they find the safe refuge of an orphanage run by a strict but loving woman played by Lillian Gish, the eventual heroine of the tale. Although the protagonist is the “Right Honorable” Reverend Powell, the empathy truly lies with the siblings in flight. There is truly no moral ambiguity for the

viewing audience in this case.

There are other examples in film where the audience either rides along with the villain as protagonist, or shotgun as the villain's intended target (Or even adversary). Nor are the 1950s the only decade for such a wellspring of storytelling.

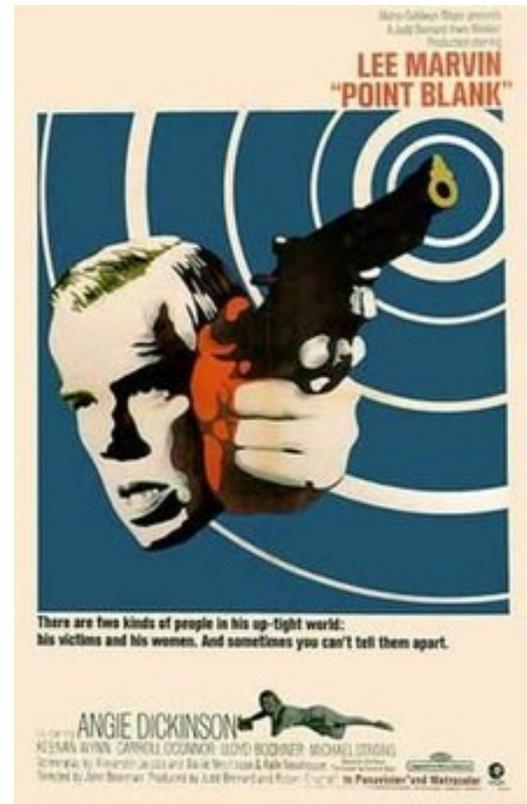
Another example, found within 1960s cinema, is *Point Blank*, referred to as part of a “New” or “Europeanized” American cinema of the time (Following the recent influences of French New Wave movies) with Lee Marvin as Walker, a career criminal and a shadow of a man double crossed in a heist and left for dead on Alcatraz Island by ex-partner Mal Reese (played by John Vernon). Making his way through a crime “organization” to get the money owed him, Walker is oddly not so much vengeful, though no one really gets in his way during his quest. (By the way, the final scene with Carol O'Connor at Fort Point is perfect.) Awash with amoral nihilism and the bleak fatalism classic of Film Noir (And recalling the tapestry of Euro-Art Cinema in the process), the “villain” is the protagonist that the audience ends up siding with, suspending morality in the process.

Other films of the 1960s may offer a “good guy” protagonist seeking justice and/or resolution as a result of being wronged. In *Bullitt*, Steve McQueen is protecting the wrong mob informant (who is killed under Bullitt's watch) and so must redeem himself and go after the real informant before he leaves the country while facing both organized crime and political bureaucratic grandstanding led by Senator Chalmers (Robert Vaughn), who Bullitt sternly warns, “You work your side of the street, and I'll work mine”.

Other examples abound; whether it's the carefree rebellious criminal protagonist in the French New Wave Classic *Breathless* or the out-of-town Police detective coerced to investigate a murder in a Southern town in *In the Heat of the Night*, the storyline, and audience, can also work “both sides of the street.”

In extreme cases, the villain-protagonist can all but win over the audience. In *Dog Day Afternoon*, Al Pacino's Sonny Wortzik fails at a clean bank robbery, resulting in a long siege against police and wherein he wins over not only the crowd outside the bank (and many watching on breaking news via television) but even many of the hostages as well, lauded as a kind of “hero” in the process.

That “winning over” of not only the audience but of those characters taken hostage can have a dark, seductive nature befitting a kind of Stockholm Syndrome. In 2004's *Collateral*, Tom Cruise (“Vincent”) takes advantage of cab driver Max (played by Jamie Foxx) who ends up unwillingly driving Vincent to various locations throughout night-time Los Angeles where would-be mob informants die, care of Vincent. Part of Vincent's seductive control over Max includes all the soothing, sociopathic manipulation as Max's newly unwanted



ed partner ("Yeah we gotta make the best of it, improvise, adapt to the environment, Darwin, shit happens, I Ching, whatever, man, we gotta roll with it") as much as to Max's fear of what happens if things don't go according to plan. At times, Max almost seems to empathize with Vincent because Vincent, the protagonist clearly devoid of morals, pretends to empathize with him, the arguable height of abuse typical of a hostage situation that, at times, may even beckon the audience.

Thus, the good-guy/bad-guy element is more spectrum than binary, a moral oscilloscope, and a true roller coaster for those lucky enough to become engaged with the stories and their various conclusions. 'Is' there a moral to stories such as these? Sometimes the best the audience can hope for is a compass to navigate such rough waters of cinema. Meanwhile, for the sake of clarity if not sanity, we may best take heart in the age-old but faithful quote from radio-drama's adaptation of Raymond Chandler's Phillip Marlowe: "Get this and get it straight, crime's a sucker's road and those who travel it wind up in the gutter, the prison or the grave."





# A Tale of Two Fletches

by Chris Garcia

**I've loved the Chevy Chase film *Fletch*** since I saw it in the theatre as a kid. It's a brilliant comedy, but at the same time, it's a smart film that clearly gave Chase a lot of room to roam with the character. What I was not wised-up to yet is that *Fletch* is also technically a neo-noir film, basically a tone-shifted version of a film like *Double Indemnity*, and like that Fred McMurray masterpiece, it's based on a book – *Fletch* by Gregory McDonald.

It probably won't shock you to learn that I'd never read it. In fact, I still haven't – I listened to the audiobook.

Having finally gotten to the origin, I'm shocked that three things are true: the book is better than the movie, the movie gives a much tighter and better fleshed-out plot, and you can point to both being profoundly a product of their times.

Come with me, won't you, on a trip through *Two Fletches*?

Gregory McDonald's *Fletch* came out in 1974, the year of Nixon's resignation, the Oakland A's and Warrior's championships, and my birth. The story follows I.M. Fletcher, a Los Angeles investigative reporter who is in deep to two ex-wives for thousands of dollars of alimony and in danger of losing his job at a major LA paper because he's not delivered a story on drugs at a local beach. As he moves through the story, it becomes clear that *Fletch* is a funny guy, but his is a dry humor somewhere between stoic and self-amusing. He has a strange relationship with women. He clearly loves them, or at least his desires for them are clear, and they almost all fall into either the category that *Fletch* wants to sleep with or the ones he detests. These circles don't overlap as much as they do in many other noir stories. He hates his editor at the paper, who happens to be sleeping with the editor in chief, and he seems to be on a string attached to his exes, though they seem to be attached to him, he seems to merely be playing with them. At one point, he puts on a show of being an employee of a property management company and slut-shames a woman who may be having an affair with the villain of the novel. At least he later admits to feeling bad about chasing down leads like that.

The story, at times, seems secondary to *Fletch*'s intelligent monologues, both interior and exterior. He's clearly digging throughout the story, and we get to see pieces fall into place at times, but that's not the goal. The goal is to make you look at *Fletch* while all these things are happening and then be amazed when they all fall into place. It works, and that's why it's a great book.



The sleight-of-plume we're given is amazing, and it's no small feat to have us snowed as heavily that when our heads finally bust through, we're both shocked and refreshed.

The plot is bifurcated, the first involving Alan Stanwyk, the brains behind the mega-aero-industrial giant Collins Aviation, who wants to hire Fletch to murder him. He's dying of cancer, you see, and wants to skip the wasting away part. At the same time, Fletch is professionally investigating the drugs that are being pushed at the beach, and his research and investigation has brought a suspect into view – the chief of police.

These two plots are not related, though they do touch upon one another. This is the biggest weakness of the book, that the solution to one problem is found in the other, non-related crime.

Stanwyk isn't who he seems to be, at the same time as being exactly who he seems to be. It's a confusing matter, and it's in establishing those facts that Fletch uses all sorts of impersonation scams. These include coming up with strange pseudonyms, which would be latched on to in the film.

Ultimately, the plot wraps up a little fast, but that's only after a thorough fleshing out of the story. It's never boring, but if you map it structurally, it's not the kind of story you'd expect to be so perfect.

The writing is impeccable, with my favorite part being the frequent use of "Fletch said . . ." instead of the ". . . Fletch said" which is more standard. The dialogue is fast, and the reading of it has some serious noir-influenced intonation.

I've read a lot of 1970s and 80s mystery novels and *Fletch* is probably the smartest-written of them all. It's just so clean, and when it finally eats its own tail, you're rooting for Fletch to give it all to us! That's a way for a book to surprise me. It is a book of its time, but there's a queer-baiting scene, and some casual sexism that really lands heavy today in a bad. It doesn't ruin the book for me, but it stands out.

The film, *Fletch*, is a one-man show. That's not to say that George Wendt and Tim Matheson aren't also great, but it's really a tour-de-force for Chevy. The story is roughly the same, it's about Stanwyk getting Fletch to kill him, but the stories are nested, which totally makes sense. Why did Stanwyk choose Fletch? In the movie, he's involved in the drug deals at the beach where Fletch is investigating, he's a pilot and has been flying the drugs in to supply the Chief. The flying is in the book, but the Chief appears to get the drugs from evidence. This makes a lot more sense when you consider that one of the key pieces of information comes to Fletch while he's interrogating Stanwyk's father-in-law. That alone deadens that sense of sudden revelation, but it also makes the final ending less shocking, though more reasonable.

The biggest difference is the character of Fletch himself. In the film, Chevy Chase is clearly having a good time disguising himself, dressing up as a mechanic, insurance salesman, roller-skating religious fellow, he plays them all physically, while in the book, it's far more about him making phone calls and long conversations. These don't translate as well to the media of the movies, but it also made Chevy Chase a perfect

choice to play the character. The ten years plus that had elapsed also meant that some things had to be updated, mostly things like his fake identities. These led to some of the funniest lines, lines that are actual gags instead of the more subtle play that the novel *Fletch* engages in. Still, lines like “Can I borrow your towel, I just hit a water buffalo?” are fantastic and make it a funnier watch than the book is a funny read. It’s decidedly middlebrow, while I could argue the book is much more highbrow.

The movie also gets rid of some of the anti-feminist aspects of the book, specifically the role of Larry, played by Geena Davis. She assists Fletch and is at least somewhat a replacement for the editor who is Fletch’s boss in the book. She’s funny, and the two of them have good chemistry. The scene in which Fletch slut-shames Stanwyk’s lover is absent too, but that’s because they cleaned up the relationships aspect to make things a lot less depressing in the final scene.

One thing that I appreciate about the film is how smart the end reveal is. It’s not the fast-acting wrap up of the book, but a big built-to set of scenes. When Fletch is flying off to Rio in the book, it has yet another moment where Fletch is dismissive of a female character, while the movie ending is actually so much more honest, and it serves as final payback for an incredibly minor, but excessively rude character early in the film.

They’re both great. I could see people watching the film who have read the book and thinking it’s just a dumb slapstick. It was the 80s and these were the comedies in vogue at the time. There’s no denying that Chase was perfect for the role either way they had played it. Chase, who had been great in *Foul Play*, has the chops to do subtle humor as well as the broad, and when you see the times in here that he’s playing it straight, he’s still great. The recent release of *Confess, Fletch*, has Jon Hamm of *Mad Men* as Fletch, and he does a better Fletch when stacked against the book, but not as magnetic a Fletch as Chase gives us.

I am now listening to the rest of the *Fletch* books and will probably revisit the *Fletch* sequel from 1989. I can not wait to get through all of them and then, without the time constraints of getting this issue ready, I’ll dig into more McDonald, including his *Flynn* books.



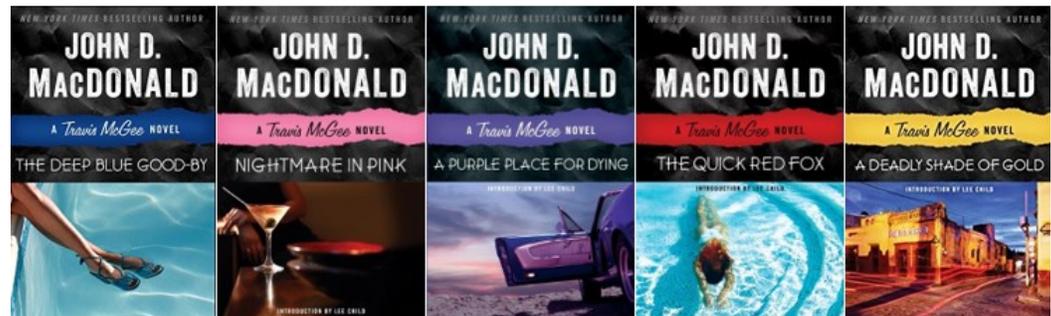


# Revisiting John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee

by Chuck Surface

**During the 1970s, most boys around Campbell,** California bonded with their fathers through sports, automotives, fishing, and hunting, not horror magazines, comic books, or Saturday afternoon science-fiction film shows. I truly wanted to bond with my father, but he was into football and baseball, and for me sports, even still today, are yuck. My only way in, it seemed, was through the stack of paperbacks adorning his nightstand, ones with cardboard cigarette ads inserts, that never ran more than 200 pages and featured covers with tough guys, high-powered firearms, and, oh, those women. Most prominent was Don Pendleton's Executioner, the inspirational sun source for many authors breaking into men's fiction, and for Marvel Comics' *The Punisher* too. Pendleton wrote 37 of the first 38 in the series, sending his hero, Mack Bolan, from city to city where he generated living hell for the American Mafia. The man was a perpetual vengeance machine, highly trained, obsessed really. If you've ever read any *Punisher* stories, you know what I mean. Men's series were booming at this time and new titles popped up monthly, and they were my hook into Dear Old Dad who was quite pleased when I'd discuss, say, *Executioner #3: Battle Mask* rather than begging him to see *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* with me. *Trash Fiction Champion* provides an expansive list that illustrates the market's breadth. In 2022, however, the titles included scream toxic masculinity: <https://trashmenace.blogspot.com/p/mens-adventure.html>.

But among the testosterone thrillers and westerns there were offerings with a bit more intellectual depth but that still resided within action and hard-boiled mystery: Ed McBain's 87<sup>th</sup> Precinct, Dick Francis's Racetrack Novels, and Ross MacDonald's Lew Archer, for example. Paramount was John MacDonald's Travis McGee, a series that for the most part hasn't fallen too mightily beneath the Suck Fairy's corrective touch over the decades. Mind you, MacDonald wrote for a masculine audience, "masculine" defined in the classic sense in-



cluding images akin to the Marlboro Man ideal: strong, emotionally detached, a loner who needs no one and nothing other than his wits and his will. Travis McGee as a character fit well into this mold, albeit idiosyncratically with hints of Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade, even if officially he isn't a licensed private investigator. And unlike Mack Bolan and Matt Helm, Travis McGee reflects – lots. Humanity, cities, relationships, life in general, all is fair game to this adventuresome philosopher, which when I was 11 went over my head, but Dad liked him, so I tried.

At 57, I've survived acute myelogenous leukemia, spent two years teaching at the university level for Peace Corps Ukraine, earned degrees in Psychology/Anthropology and English Literature, and worked steadily within the crisis-intervention/suicide-prevention field. Safe to say, I've progressed emotionally and intellectually beyond most men's literature, but I wondered about MacDonald and Travis McGee, since even back then I could detect "something more." Recently then, I read the first five out of 21 Travis McGee books to find out what I'd see now that I couldn't see then, if anything at all.

McGee lives beyond societal bonds. He holds no steady employment and lives aboard the Busted Flush, a custom-made 52-foot houseboat that he won playing poker. His automobile is Miss Agnes, a Rolls Royce pickup truck. To get by, he picks up odd salvaging jobs, recovering money, jewels, stolen valuables for 50-percent of the value. Once cash-heavy, he continues the retirement he takes between engagements rather than taking it all during senior citizenship like most of us do. You need something found or recovered? Then visit Travis McGee at Slip F-18, Bahia Mar Marina, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. You can't miss his houseboat. It's moored near the one occupied by the Alabama Tiger and his never-ending, floating party.



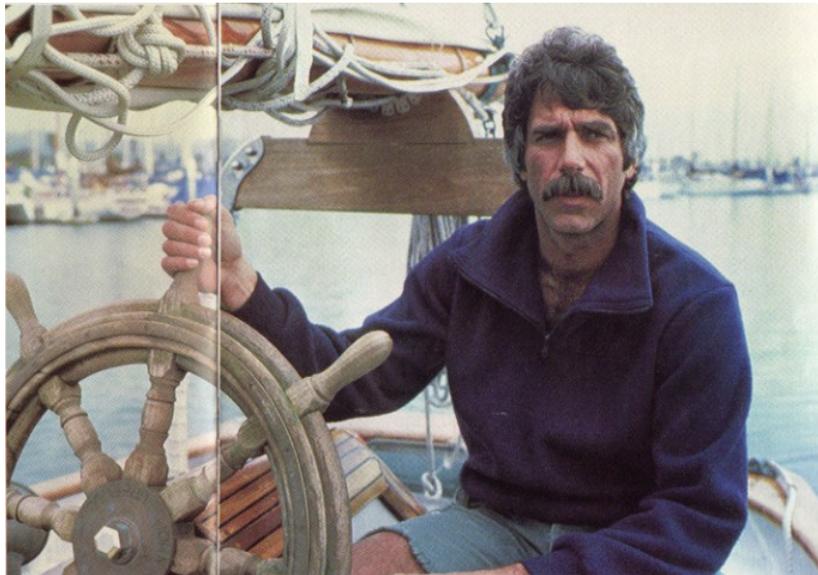
Don't let that mid-1960s go-go imagery fool you, however. Author Kelley Eskridge describes what attracts her to this series:

MacDonald does that kind of thing all the time — Travis takes a moment to ruminate on some aspect of life, the universe and everything, and then just goes on about his day. He’s a smart, complex man engaged with his world and yet very separate from it. A thoughtful man, a man of sex and violence, a man who sits still for sunsets and notices the small beauties of the world. A man who wanders through his own interior swamps and doesn’t always like what he finds but owns it anyway.

Yes, Eskridge also notes the moments of casual racism, sexism, and homophobia – unfortunate features of the era with which our culture continues to struggle – but although she dislikes these elements, they don’t spoil the books for her. “These days,” she says, “I need emotional truth and growth and the feeling of recognition in both the joys and sorrows.”

One disturbing instance of homophobia occurs in the fourth novel, *The Quick Red Fox*. While tracking down sexually explicit photos for a famous actress suffering extortion, McGee encounters a woman character living with her “bull” and describes bulls as preying on vulnerable women, indoctrinating them into the lifestyle. Yowza. Especially now when far-right groups are fear-mongering with bullshit about LGBTQ+ communities “recruiting” and “grooming” children for the lifestyle, such passages read extremely rough. Not a proud moment for John D. MacDonald most assuredly.

Even so, I enjoyed all five novels and will continue reading the series. I’ll even scare up *Darker than Amber* (1970) starring Rod Taylor and Travis McGee (1983) a made-for-television film with Sam Elliott playing our favorite laconic beach bum. Elliott, I think even without having seen the film, is casting genius. MacDonald also wrote *Cape Fear*, presenting to the world Max Cady, the villain so frighteningly portrayed first by Robert Mitchum and then by Robert DeNiro.



Decades later, Dad and I still bond over genre media, but now we're more into *Columbo* and *Doc Martin* than Remo Williams or James Bond. Last year, we watched the entire runs of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *The Golden Girls*, and *Hot in Cleveland*. Good Lord, man! You'd let someone catch you watch that? What happened to your masculine pride? Bah. I defy any alpha-hero to face Betty White toe-to-toe and come away with their testes intact. The wiser Travis McGee would weigh his options before going there, and so I remain a fan.

