

The Salvage Expert Who Saved Souls

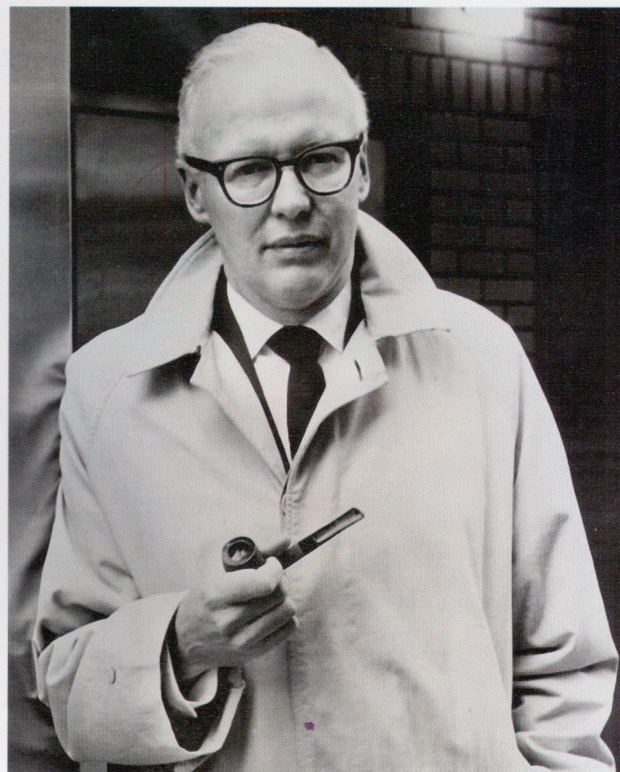
By Dennis Lehane

He was not hard-boiled. If anything, he was over-easy.

Shaggy, loose-limbed and effortlessly cool, Travis McGee was unencumbered by so many of the things that not only define adulthood but also wreck it. He hated credit cards, status symbols of any kind, material acquisition for its own sake, and any of the needless constraints society places on its members in the name of, well, membership. McGee had no desire to be part of society, at least not any that extended beyond the ragtag group of beach bums and boat rats that made up his beloved Bahia Mar cohort. McGee was not a private detective or a gun for hire; he was a "salvage expert." If you needed something saved—including yourself—he would help (for a price, of course, and not a cheap one.) He would claim to engage in this work only when his personal stash of cash was running low but, softy that he was, he often broke that rule.

And if his hippy, groovy, new-girl-every-other-week Fort Lauderdale lifestyle on the *Busted Flush* appears, in retrospect, a hair antiquated and sexist, it's astounding to read the books now and see how far ahead of his time McGee and his creator, John D. MacDonald, actually were. McGee saw the price most would pay for confusing free love with empty sex, saw the carnage that could be wrought by men who objectified women, and railed against the rapacious exploitation that was going to befall his beloved Florida.

In terms of the wholesale obliteration of the environment that Florida has come to embody, it's impossible to imagine a more prescient series of books than the Travis McGee novels. MacDonald knew what damage condos, office parks, theme



parks and golf courses—all proliferating like cancer cells—would do to the water supply, the flora, and the overall ethos of the state he loved. The world he loved was vanishing as he wrote about it (McGee's South Florida is actually far more reminiscent of West Central Florida where John D. MacDonald lived) and his is a romantic's forlorn lament against "progress" and its whore-twin, profit, that reminds one of Vonnegut's famous line: "We could have saved the earth, but we were too damned cheap."

In a heartless, bottom-line world, Travis McGee, the most romantic of "knights errant," bravely bestowed chivalry wherever the opportunity presented itself. No castle for him, no finery beyond his armor. And every time his heart broke—and has any series character in male crime fiction had their heart broken more by the world than McGee?—he rebuilt it.

He salvaged it. Because he knew there were those far less fortunate and far more lost than he who might need it someday.



Dennis Lehane is the author of twelve novels, including *Mystic River*, *The Given Day*, and his latest, *World Gone By*. Growing up, his two favorite crime fiction series characters were John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee and Richard Stark's Parker. Lehane currently lives in California with his wife and two children.