

A Source of Solace and Inspiration

By Sue Grafton

Ross Macdonald, pseudonym for California crime novelist Kenneth Millar, elevated hard-boiled detective fiction from its earthy, energetic origins in the works of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, to a well-deserved place on the bestsellers list; at the same time establishing his reputation as a gifted storyteller and a fine craftsman. In the matter of tributes to our literary forebears, I trust fawning will not be deemed unattractive or out of place.

I was privileged to meet Ross Macdonald in Santa Barbara sometime in the late Sixties, long before my 1982 debut as a mystery writer. We were introduced by a mutual acquaintance and shook hands in passing. I was, at that point, a lowly student in an adult education class on creative writing and he had already achieved near-legendary status. I would love to report that he made some pithy comment that shaped my aspirations and gave impetus to my ambition. Alas, he did not. I recall his gaze sliding right over me, albeit politely and with a certain gentlemanly air of insouciance.

Where Hammett and Chandler wrote only a scant few novels each, (five in Hammett's case, seven in Chandler's), Ross Macdonald's eighteen Lew Archer novels covered a span of some twenty-five years, allowing the writer a narrative range and breadth in which to hone his skills. He incorporated into the Lew Archer novels his own maturing worldview, and thus imbued the series with a melancholy, hard-won wisdom.

When I began to explore the idea of writing a crime novel, one of the first books I read was Ross Macdonald's slender volume, *On Crime Writing*, published by Capra Press in 1973. His view of the



genre and his attitude toward his work is beautifully documented in the writing he did on the subject.

"Detective story writers are often asked why we devote our talents to working in a mere popular convention. One answer is that there may be more to our use of the convention than meets the eye... Disguise is the imaginative device which permits the work to be both private and public, to half-divulge the writer's crucial secrets while deepening the whole community's sense of its own mysterious life."

His lucid, sometimes jaded, observations about the moral climate of Southern California and his juxtaposition of decency and fair-mindedness with the elements of social corruption and personal loss resonate throughout the rich body of his work. Ross Macdonald perfected his art over the course of his career, offering other writers his unfailing support

and remaining to the last, thoughtful, unassuming, and erudite. Even now, in idle moments, I return to his work for solace and inspiration.

Sue Grafton entered the mystery field in 1982 with the publication of *A Is For Alibi*, which introduced the hard-boiled female private eye, Kinsey Millhone, who lives and works in the fictional Southern California town of Santa Teresa.



B Is For Burglar, the second in the projected alphabet series, was published in 1985. Thirty-two years have now passed and Ms. Grafton, still toiling away, expects to complete her work in the year 2019. *X* will be out this year.