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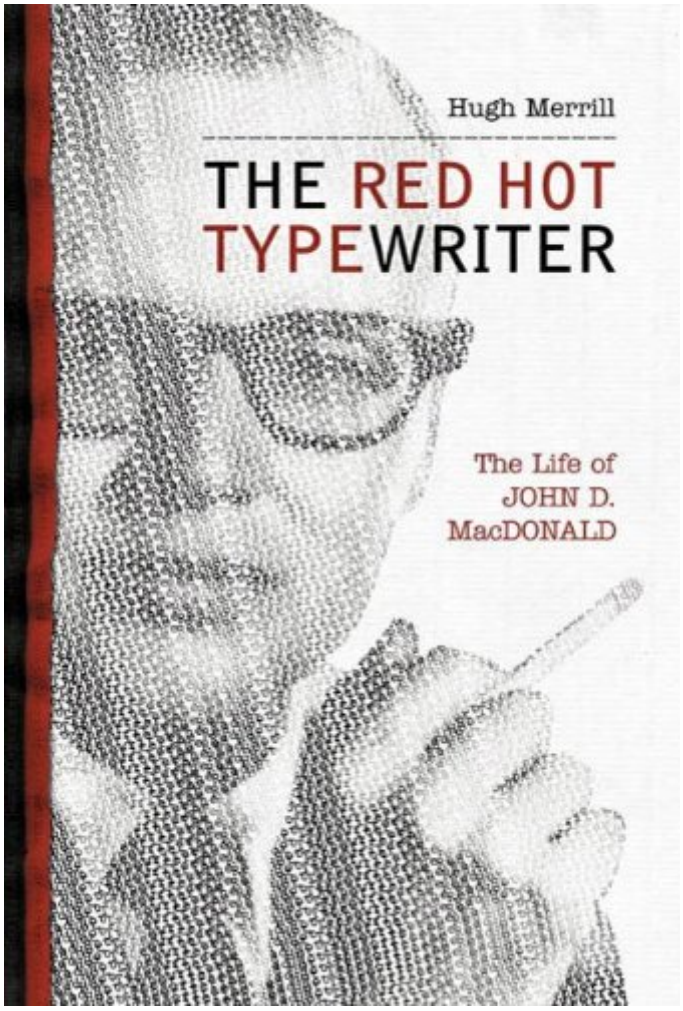
The Red Hot Typewriter: The Life And Times Of John D. MacDonald



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Synopsis

Although John D. MacDonald published seventy novels and more than five hundred short stories in his lifetime, he is remembered best for his Travis McGee series. He introduced McGee in 1964 with The Deep Blue Goodbye. With Travis McGee, MacDonald changed the pattern of the hardboiled private detectives who preceeded him. McGee has a social conscience, holds thoughtful conversations with his retired economist buddy Meyer, and worries about corporate greed, racism and the Florida ecolgoy in a long series whose brand recognition for the series the author cleverly advanced by inserting a color in every title. Merrill carefully builds a picture of a man who in unexpected ways epitomized the Horatio Alger sagas that comprised his strict father's secular bible. From a financially struggling childhood and a succession of drab nine-to-five occupations, MacDonald settled down to writing for a living (a lifestyle that would have horrified his father). He worked very hard and was rewarded with a more than decent livelihood. But unlike Alger's heroes, MacDonald had a lot of fun doing it.

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Customer Reviews

How do you write a biography of a man and not talk to anyone who knew him, not visit anyplace he

lived, and not include any photographs of the man or his family? It's easy: you write brief introductions to letters and passages from the writer's books, and call it a biography. The Red Hot Typewriter isn't red or hot. It is a color-by-numbers biography that is in the end colorless. A massive disappointment if you're a John D. fan, or a fan of good biography.

I am a long time MacDonald fan, and have read most everything he wrote. I once made the pilgrimage to Bahia Mar to see the `Busted Flush' plaque mounted there.I was delighted when I learned of Hugh Merrill's biography, and curious to know more about MacDonald, the man who created Travis McGee, and wrote so eloquently about the Florida environment. The Red Hot Typewriter is a disappointment.It is worth reading if you are a die-hard fan. It includes bits of interesting trivia. What was McGee's first name and why was it changed to Travis? Why the reference to a color in the Magee mystery series?However, you finish the book feeling as if you don't know John D. MacDonald much better than you did when you began. The author obviously did a lot of research. Unfortunately he presents it in a rather bland and superficial manner. It's as if the author's primary reference source was MacDonald's correspondence, and he didn't go much beyond that. The thoughts and personal anecdotes of friends and family are, for the most part, missing.What really surprises and disappoints me is that this book has no photographs, none, nada, zero. Pictures would have saved this book for me. I am at a loss to understand why any publisher would produce a biography without including pictures that complement the prose. One of many examples was Hugh Merrill's description of MacDonald's visit to the set where a Travis McGee mystery was being made into a movie. Surely, Warner Brothers publicity took pictures, but you won't find them in this biography.

Like the best of his subject's work, Hugh Merrill has fashioned a lean, direct biography of John D. MacDonald, creator of the Travis McGee series. The design and feel of the book transports the reader back to the age of pulp fiction and early paperback originals. Fans of John D. will find all the highlights of his career here. Gaps are filled in family background and some insights are provided to the inner workings of the author's mind and motivations. This is not an exhaustive examination of his career but a very good starting place. One wishes for some more details. How does the non-athletic youth become the adult who on occasion has grabbed another by the lapels, or broken up a fight outside Billie Holliday's dressing room? Does research and work ethic enable a writer to so powerfully describe casual violence and banality? John D. was a private man who obviously guarded his feelings. Perhaps the real John D. is most visible in Travis and Meyer. An enlightening

and informative, easy read that only makes one appreciate and miss John D. even more.

I had not heard of John D. MacDonald until I read a column in the Los Angeles Times by Jack Smith writing about his vacation. Smith had brought along MacDonald's A Man of Affairs to read and his cryptic review was something like, the man really knows his stuff. I found the book in a local bookstore and read the brief bio on the back cover and that was enough and I bought it. I didn't read it until later, by that time both MacDonald and Smith were dead. A Man of Affairs really was good. Then, I read Nightmare in Pink, which was astonishingly good.MacDonald comes through in this account as much a rebel as one could be among the World War II generation. He was in and out of college in the late 30's and backtalker in business and thus prone to getting fired. He finally gets through Harvard Business School with an MBA and you get the impression it didn't have the cache it had later. He went into the Army in 1940, as a last resort, and finally found a niche.He became a writer by accident, when his wife successfully submitted a manuscript unbeknownst to him. Red Hot Typewriter's strength lies in its account of pulp magazines and paperback trade, its rise and evolution, with hack writers churning out science fiction, detective pot boilers, and westerns paid in pennies per word.I think Red Hot Typewriter gives a good account of his tastes, values, work habits, and family background. At times, it reads like what's called a "cut and paste job" in academic writing. It evidently is not all that satisfying to the real fans of John MacDonald, but I'm not the one to judge it on that basis for now. As an introduction to him in general, it is good enough for now. I read the Kindle version.

As a diehard John D. MacDonald fan, I felt the book left much to be desired. MacDonald's pre-Travis McGee work, from l950-1960 most notably, was barely mentioned, or dismissed as unimportant. The author never took the time to interview the many people who worked with or knew MacDonald, relying only on correspondance. Overall, the book was a disappointment.

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