

DISCOVER ||| Books

Vintage Ross Macdonald

Detective Lew Archer is back in rereleases of 1950s crime novels

BY SCOTT TIMBERG

He wasn't the hardest of the hard-boiled or the toughest of the tough guys.

But Lew Archer, the often melancholy hero of a series of acclaimed detective novels by Ross Macdonald, matched his biting asides with a humane world view, a love of the underdog and — when he wasn't boxing or downing Scotch — an introspective charisma and cerebral temperament.

And while Archer narrates 18 novels, deemed by William Goldman in 1969 as "the finest series of detective novels ever written by an American author," he remains almost spectral — in the shadows of his own books.

Macdonald himself, according to biographer Tom Nolan, "liked to say that Archer was such a 'thin presence' that if he turned sideways he'd disappear."

But the brooding detective — whose tales have proved inspirational to writers, from Robert Crais to James Ellroy to Michael Chabon — has become, this summer, a bit less elusive.

Vintage Books has just rereleased two early Archer novels, 1951's *The Way Some People Die* and '52's *The Ivory Grin*, on its Black Lizard imprint. These books, which have not been widely available for more than a decade, will be joined by two other Archers in December. When *The Instant Enemy* and *The Blue Hammer*, Macdonald's last novel, come out in April, all 18 Archer books will be in print.

At the same time, biographer Nolan has for the first time compiled all of the short stories in which Archer appears, as well as 11 fragments he found in the author's archives at the University of California, Irvine. They're all reprinted in the new *The Archer Files*, which begins with Nolan's 25-page biographical sketch of the detective.

"I think it's a hugely important book," said Otto Penzler, a mystery authority and proprietor of New York's Mysterious Bookshop. "Obviously, getting all the short stories back into print is a wonderful thing. And Nolan did a brilliant job at pulling together every bit of information about Archer that's been in the books and making reasonable assumptions."

Ross Macdonald is the pen name of Kenneth Millar (1915-83), who, although raised in Vancouver, spent most of his career in Santa Barbara, Calif., and set the bulk of his novels in and around Los Angeles. Although he's not as well known as Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett, in part because he had less luck with movie and television adaptations, Macdonald's novels helped rewrite the hard-boiled tradition. (He was married to mystery writer Margaret Millar.)

The Archer books, over three decades, move gradually away from the hard-boiled model associated with

Chandler into a more personal approach, often marked by an interest in the California land- and seascape and in the unravelling of society. With their runaway children, idle rich, recreational drug use, rampant divorce and deepening generation gap, the novels seem to track the beginnings of contemporary Southern California.

"Once he found his own prose style," said Nolan, "which was very poetic and elegant and precise, he wrote novels which would never be mistaken for a Chandler or a Hammett book. He moved away from the ... emphasis on criminals and gangsters to looking at the tragedy and pathos of family life. His approach was more like Ibsen, who blamed everybody: There was enough guilt in his books to go around."

By his breakthrough around 1960, Macdonald's books incorporated in-depth psychology and an interest in the youth subcultures taking root on the West Coast.

Macdonald had a tight control of storytelling and the ability to spring a surprise ending that's also logical and consistent.

"In a lot of his books, as he's investigating the current crime, he becomes involved in investigating something from the past," Nolan said. "So that plot is going forward but also backward. There's a point about two-thirds of the way through where they start to circle around each other, and they come together right at the end: It's almost a physical sensation when you're reading it."

Macdonald's last books, published in the '70s, add a concern with the environment that's hard to imagine in an earlier noir writer. (Although tellingly, the imagery is framed with Chandleresque wit: An oil drilling platform resembles "the metal handle of a dagger that had stabbed the world and made it spill black blood. ... It smelled like something that had died but would never go away.")

Writers from Crais to Robert B. Parker to Sue Grafton are indebted to him. Even Ellroy, whose dense, morally twisted novels seem far from the liberal humanism of Macdonald, has praised the Archer books and their entanglements in old family traumas.

"I like the way Macdonald worked with buried secrets, original sin, evil passed down through the generations," said Denise Hamilton, editor of the L.A. Noir anthology, who was especially struck by the surfer subculture in 1962's *The Zebra-Striped Hearse*.

"He captured something almost Greek in the primitive atavism," she said.

"These pagans gathered around a fire at the edge of the continent, at night. He really captured something about youth tribes."

Macdonald's following ranged well beyond noir's usual suspects: Eudora Welty gave 1971's *The Underground*



Master crime writer Ross Macdonald influenced many authors.

Man a rave on the cover of the New York Times Book Review, then quite rare for a genre book. During his lifetime, he was friends with poet Henri Coulette and rocker Warren Zevon, and more recently, authors Haruki Marukami, Jonathan Lethem and Chabon have hailed his influence.

The reissued novels are from the early '50s, relatively early for Macdonald. But his style is already clear: A few pages into *The Way Some People Die*, Archer drives into a city called Pacific Point.

"It rose from sea level in a gentle slope," Macdonald writes, "divided neatly into social tiers, like something a sociologist had built to prove a theory."

Macdonald earned a PhD in English literature at the University of Michigan, where he studied with W.H. Auden and wrote on Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Like his author — whom Nolan describes in his 1999 biography as dressing like a Midwesterner in the Santa Barbara sunshine and speaking with a Scots-Canadian accent — Archer could be quiet, barely there.

"He's not a guy who pulls out a gun or who's at the centre of everything," Penzler said.

"He's more cerebral than the other major detectives. The prose style holds your interest in a guy who's basically thinking, rather than doing something. That's the great skill

Macdonald brings to it that most other writers couldn't. But otherwise they'd be snores: So much of it is internal, which is why they're hard to film."

"With Chandler," said Crais, "the characters are observed through the Marlowe lens," which is tempered with the private eye's dry cynicism. "But in Macdonald, the window you're looking through was clear glass."

It might be that the low-key private eye allowed the personalities and back stories of his clients and suspects to fill out, in the same way a certain kind of psychoanalyst subordinates his presence for the sake of his patient.

"What do you think you are?" a suspect asks Archer in *The Way Some People Die*. "A psychoanalyst?"

"Thank God I'm not yours," he responds. "I wouldn't want to have to explain what made you do what you did. ... There's a lot of truth to be told, after all the lies, and if you won't tell it, I will. It might give you a little insight into yourself."

Archer was always trying to look deeper into characters and their motivations, just as Macdonald was, reportedly, a serious, searching character.

Today he seems — even more than he did in his lifetime — like a figure out of time, someone both worldly and not made for this world.

The Los Angeles Times

BESTSELLERS

ORIGINAL FICTION

- (1) 14 *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini (Viking Canada).
- (4) 3 *Spook Country*, William Gibson (Putnam).
- (3) 19 *The Children of Hurin*, J.R.R. Tolkien edited by Christopher Tolkien (HarperCollins).
- (5) 2 *Sandworms of Dune*, Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson (Tor).
- (2) 6 *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, J.K. Rowling (Raincoast).

ORIGINAL NON-FICTION

- (1) 17 *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Christopher Hitchens (McClelland & Stewart).
- (3) 6 *The World Without Us*, Alan Weisman (HarperCollins).
- (7) 2 *You Can Run But You Can't Hide*, Duane Dog Chapman (Hyperion).
- (2) 44 *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins (Houghton Mifflin).
- (4) 27 *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Ishmael Beah (Douglas & McIntyre).

REPRINT FICTION

- (1) 2 *Break No Bones*, Kathy Reichs (Pocket).
- (3) 12 *Middlesex*, Jeffrey Eugenides (Vintage Canada).
- (2) 4 *Echo Park*, Michael Connelly (Warner).
- (4) 3 *Knights of the Black and White*, Jack Whyte (Penguin Canada).
- (8) 123 *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini (Anchor Canada).

REPRINT NON-FICTION

- (1) 26 *Eat Pray Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert (Penguin).
- (2) 72 *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*, Jeanette Walls (Scribner).
- (4) 21 *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell (Back Bay Books).
- (3) 4 *The World is Flat*, Thomas L. Friedman (Douglas & McIntyre).
- (7) 31 *The Measure of a Man*, Sidney Poitier (HarperCollins).

SPECIAL INTEREST

- (2) 36 *The Secret*, Rhonda Byrne (Beyond Words).
- (1) 3 *Get Smarter: Life and Business Lessons*, Seymour Schulich with Derek DeCloet (Key Porter).
- (10) 19 *The Weight Loss Cure They Don't Want You to Know About*, Kevin Trudeau (Alliance).
- (7) 3 *The ABS Diet for Women*, David Zincenko with Ted Spiker (Rodale).
- (3) 4 *Change Your Thoughts Change Your Life*, Wayne W. Dyer (Hay House).

(1) = Book's position last week
2 = Number of weeks on the list

CANADIAN MYSTERIES ||| By Don Graves

The Judge of Orphans By Rosemary Aubert (iUniverse, \$18.95)

Rosemary Aubert is the author of the acclaimed Ellis Portal mystery series, and a winner of the Arthur Ellis prize for best mystery novel.

The Judge of Orphans is her latest mystery featuring Toronto lawyer Mary Rose Cabrini and her promotion to judge of orphans.

Cabrini's induction ceremony is touched by a visually intriguing plea from a small child who begs for help to discover the truth about his own family.

But can small kids be trusted? The small child, who has made such an impression on the soon-to-be judge, leads her to New York City and a story bedded in the turn of the 20th century when street kids not only told lies to survive but also fought poverty, illness and the abuse of other kids and cops.

The judge is quickly trapped into legal wrangling, false charges that threaten her career and dishonest politicians who will stop at nothing, including murder, to keep the story from surfacing.

Fighting for her life, Cabrini must make a decision about a child's capacity to trap her into a web of shame, deceit and possibly death.

The story is vintage Aubert, carefully crafted with her descriptive attention to scenic detail and feeling that were the hallmark of the Ellis Portal novels.

The Judge of Orphans is about the need for our history to remain alive in our souls.

Aubert makes the case with eloquence and determination.

Ruby Tuesday: An Eddie Dancer Mystery By Mike Harrison (ECW Mystery, \$28.95)

Three pages into *Ruby Tuesday* and you're ready to hire private Detective Eddie Dancer yourself: he's concise bordering on abrupt, honest — or a damned convincing liar — and a crisp, articulate storyteller, or at least the author, Mike Harrison, is.

Paul Miller, an advertising guru past his prime, has been downsized. Feeling it down to his gut, he steps forward to play knight-in-shining-armor when an abusive husband strikes his wife. First problem — Miller is out of shape, past it. Second problem — the husband is a muscle-bound boxer with a short temper. The third problem — a security camera that records the ensuing confrontation and Miller is arrested for assault.

The first unworkable solution is Miller's offer to go three rounds and if he loses he pays \$50,000 he doesn't have. The better solution — Miller's wife hires Eddie Dancer to stop the fight.

The writing is tight and the descriptive voice is powerful with dialogue punctuated with colourful retorts and tinged with sympathy.

The training scenes are particularly effective. There is a twist with the intensity of a ticking time-bomb that explodes into a dynamic conclusion.

As a reader I create visual images of the main characters. Descriptions play an obvious part, but the dialogue is the clincher and author Harrison scores a knockout in *Ruby Tuesday*.

The Last to Die: Ronald Turpin, Arthur Lucas and the End of Capital Punishment in Canada By Robert J. Hoshowsky (The Dundurn Group, \$24.99)

True crime is more than reporting. Writing true crime that grips readers and leads them into the rich, back story, the social history and the impact of the crime, is rare. R.J. Hoshowsky achieves all of this and more.

The Last to Die is an exciting and thought-provoking examination about the last two men to die in Canada by execution — Arthur Lucas and Ronald Turpin, both hanged on Dec. 11, 1962, at Toronto's Don Jail.

The Last to Die is an absorbingly detailed study, complete with a well-chosen photo section, of the crimes committed by these men, the story of how they were caught, defended and executed. And that is just the beginning.

The back story is what lifts *The Last to Die* into a category all its own: how the crimes affected the Canadian psyche, how the government of the day reacted and how Turpin's murder of a police officer (married with four young daughters) changed the treatment of police widows.

The executions left those involved greatly changed: the alcoholic lawyer who defended both men and the Salvation Army chaplain who spent the remainder of his life haunted by their executions.

The Last to Die puts you into the cultural storm that raged in Toronto at the time these crimes were committed (1962) and defines the atmosphere that prepared society for the abolition of the death penalty. It's a stirring exploration into the insights about the last execution in Canada.

Glitter of Diamonds: A Manziuk & Ryan Mystery By N.J. Lindquist. (Murder Will Out Mysteries, \$16.95)

N.J. Lindquist's *Glitter of Diamonds* is the second in the Manziuk & Ryan police procedural series. It's a classic whodunit with a contemporary baseball setting and neatly crafted plot twists.

The Toronto Matrix has discovered a new star-pitcher, a winner on the field and a media nightmare in the dugout.

In short order he's found dead, the result of a particularly vicious battling practice using his head as the target.

A local sports talk-show host has suggested that this brazen young newcomer learn a lesson or two and has to work hard to convince veteran Detective Manziuk and his recently promoted new partner Jacqueline Ryan that no harm was intended with her radio antics.

The carefully plotted story is neatly integrated into the world of pro sports — the emotions of the fans, the business-dollar-hype of management and agents, plus the media persuasiveness when it comes to the mystery of baseball as part of our cultural fabric.

The writing has humour, the story-telling is edged with compassion and the characters are well drawn. The story is baseball, the language is the stress, ego and entertainment of professional sport and the result is an exciting stand-up triple.

Special to *The Hamilton Spectator*
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