READING FOR SURVIVAL

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the Center for the Book
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The theme will be the terrible isolation of the nonreader, his life without meaning or substance because he cannot comprehend the world in which he lives.

John D. MacDonald
to the Center for the Book
October 1985

John D. MacDonald (1916-1986)

PREFACE

As part of the "Literary Heritage of the States" project, the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress and the Florida Center for the Book are pleased to reprint this powerful testimonial about the value of reading from one of America's favorite authors. The story of how and why John MacDonald wrote *Reading for Survival* is told in the afterword. This affirmation of the ability of reading to empower and change lives, finished only a few months before John MacDonald's death, has become the most popular publication ever produced by the Center for the Book. After the first printing had disappeared, the Book-of-the-Month Club produced a special edition for its members. The continuing demand has led to this edition, and we are grateful to the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund for supporting its publication.

John MacDonald, who wrote more than seventy books, is a major figure in Florida's literary heritage. The Florida Center for the Book, the first in a network of affiliated state centers, continues to celebrate MacDonald's legacy in its continuing program of bringing authors and readers together.

Since this essay was published, the number of state affiliates of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress has increased sharply. The mission of the national and state centers, however, has remained constant: to stimulate public interest in books, reading, and libraries and to encourage the study of the role of books and print culture in society.

The state centers use national promotion themes, such as 1993–94's "Books Change Lives." Each center's primary focus, however, is on raising awareness of the literary heritage and

book culture of the state. For information about reading promotion projects of individual states and the activities of the national center, write the Center for the Book, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540–8200.

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The big thunder-engine of early summer was moving into sync along Florida's east coast, sloshing millions of tons of water onto the baked land and running off too quickly—as it always does.

An impressive line of anvil clouds marched ashore on that Friday afternoon in June, electrocuting golfers, setting off burglar alarms, knocking out phone and power lines, scaring the whey out of the newcomers.

Meyer's live-aboard cruiser, the *Thorstein Veblen*, had been hauled for some bottom work, and he was spending the day aboard my houseboat, the *Busted Flush*. I was doing a job I hate and had avoided for too long, sorting out the music cassettes, setting aside the giveaways and the ones to erase, getting them all back into the right boxes.

After a very impressive flash/crack/boom the lights went out, the air-conditioning groaned to a stop, and the refrigerator made a gargling sound and faded into the silence. Wind gusts were tilting and creaking the old houseboat. I looked out and saw how high the heavy rain was bouncing off the decks and superstructure of my neighbors at Bahia Mar, Fort Lauderdale.

Meyer put his book aside and levered himself up out of my best chair. He yawned and stretched, a broad, solid bear of a man, a hairy freelance economist, teacher, and lecturer, a friend of man and beast.

"Too dark for reading," I said.

"I wasn't reading, Travis."

"Please excuse me. My mistake. You had the book open and you were staring down at the pages and I thought . . . foolishly enough . . ."

"I was thinking about something. A passage in the book started me thinking about something."

"Like what?"

No reply. I don't think he heard me. When you and I think it is a fairly simple process. A lot of fuzzy notions bump about in our skulls like play toys in a roiled swimming pool. With brute force and exasperation we sort them into a row and reach a conclusion, the quicker the better. With Meyer it is quite a different process. He has a skull like a house I read about once, where an old lady kept building on rooms because she thought if she ever stopped building she would die. It became an architectural maze, hundreds of rooms stuck on every which way. Meyer knows his way around his rooms. He knows where the libraries are, and the little laboratories, the computer rooms, the print shop, the studios. When he thinks, he wanders from room to room, looking at a book here, a pamphlet there, a specimen across the hall. His ideas are compilations of the thought and wisdom he has accumulated up until now.

I knew that if I kept my mouth shut he would probably show me an edge of his idea, a quick flash of it, a suggestion of its shape. Later, when he had worked it over, smoothed it out, tucked in the dangling edges, he might tell me the whole thing—provided he thought it was in an area that might interest me, and that I could comprehend.

I took a pair of battery lanterns out of a locker, put one on the coffee table and took the other into the gallery alcove. I saw no point in starting up my own generator. The rain had cooled the afternoon all the way down to probably eighty degrees. But if the power stayed off, my ice supply was endangered, and I decided to use it to save it. I did not ask him to join me in a Boodles on the rocks. I went ahead and made two of them in the big old-fashioned glasses and went to where he stood and put one in his hand.

He raised it slowly, absently, to his lips, took a swallow. It startled him. He looked at the drink and then at me. "Sorry," he said. "I was just . . ."

"I know. Thinking."

He took another swallow. He walked over and sat by the coffee table and put his drink near the lantern.

"Strange thing about an idea," he said. "You can never tell whether it is so totally obvious it seems simple-minded, or whether it is composed of relationships you should have seen before. Most ideas are merely structures—things built on bits of knowledge and insight you already possess. If the knowledge you possess is in error, the structure will be flawed."

I sat across from him. "What's this one about?"

"Maybe the stress of survival."

"I've been stressed now and then."

"I am thinking of the long range. Hundreds of thousands of years. Millions of years. The stress of survival caused adaptations. Specific adaptations. The neck of the giraffe. The cushioned brain of the woodpecker. The nematocysts of the Portuguese man-of-war."

"The what?"

"The poisonous areas on the tentacles."

"Oh."

"Specific adaptations developed over long periods of time to preserve the species. Grazing animals which lived on the leaves of trees had to grow longer and longer necks, or starve. Just as man breeds show dogs and beef cattle. And turkeys with so much weight of breast meat, their legs are all sinew. Biological evolution creates precise adaptations so that a creature can survive in one single environment. And certainly man has developed through biological evolution. What man has grown for himself over millennia is this wondrous stack of neurons and blood vessels encased in bone." And he rapped himself on the skull with his knuckles.

"A lot of church people aren't going to think too much of your idea, if this is the way you have to lead into it."

"Creationism? Garden of Eden? The world is six thousand years old? Every word in the Bible is true? Everybody has a right to his or her belief, Travis. But they have no right to impose it by statute and ordinance on anyone else against their will. These days the Shiites are trying to impose on the Sunnis their particular version of the Koran. A very warlike version. Forcible imposition doesn't work."

"Okay, Meyer. Let's assume mankind grew this brain. How come?"

"He grew it very quickly, in probably just one million years, which is only a moment in geological time. The first creature we can legitimately call manlike evolved most probably in Africa near the equator, possibly in the valley of the Omo River in Ethiopia near Lake Rudolph and the Great Rift Valley. Down in the hard baked sludge of two million years ago, the anthropologists found our ancestors, along with the animals he hunted. The animals have not changed to any great extent over the past two million years, but man has changed dramatically."

"How come?"

"Let me give you some background. We can safely assume a common ancestor for man, ape, and monkey about fifty million years ago. The lemur, with fingernails instead of claws, opposed thumb, eyes in the front of its head. Man and monkey took divergent paths thirty million years ago. Our records of the intervening millions of years are sketchy until we come to *Australopithecus africanus*, a creature about four feet tall with a brain weighing a pound and a half. He knew how to make a weapon by hammering a rock with another rock until the edge was sharp. He lived in a moist jungle climate. He ate fruits, berries, roots, stalks, and small animals. But then came the challenge. A great and lasting drought, changing the climate, challenging him, stressing him.

"We pick up on him again a million years later. *Homo erectus*. He has spread a long way from Africa. Peking man, found in China. Fossil skulls in Germany. The Neanderthal in the Middle East. He has a three-pound brain, as big as ours today. He is taller. There have been improvements in the structure of his hand, making it better for grasping and better for delicate work. Lots of changes in the brain centers. You understand of course that I use the generic *he*, meaning mankind—men, women, and children. I yield to no man in my respect for women and my awareness of their equality, but I refuse to corrupt the language with those grotesque mannerisms which began, I believe, with chairperson."

He got up slowly, frowning. He swallowed some of his drink, put the glass down, and began pacing back and forth, four steps forward, four steps aft. He was switching to lecture mode. I have seen him do it before. I cease to be McGee and become Audi-

ence. He gathers his thoughts and speaks with care, in rounded sentences, pausing from time to time to look at the Audience.

"Let us try to imagine a day in the life of *Homo erectus* one and a half million years ago, when he is in the middle of those great changes. He is a member of a group. They are roving hunters. They will stay in an area, in shelters they contrive, until food stocks in that area are depleted. His group, his tribe, has begun to accumulate a store of knowledge passed down from generation to generation. Knowledge and myth. He will have been told of and shown the hundreds of different plants and trees which bear some relationship to his survival. Never eat the fruit of this bush. To heal a cut, crush the leaves of this plant and tie them to the wound with a length of vine. He will have to know the characteristic tracks and spoor of hundreds of creatures. To all the information he has been given, he will add the knowledge he has picked up, his personal storehouse. The only place he can store all the data necessary to survival is in his head.

"Picture him as a member of a hunting party, advancing through scrub land. He will be tense, using every sense, aware of any change in the direction of the breeze. He will be listening, watching, scenting, with hundreds of dangers in his memory banks, thousands of experiences of the hunt in mind. He will have to have learned how to make weapons, learned a crude pharmacology, learned about fire, learned the vulnerability and the danger of many creatures, learned his place in his social order, learned how to fight other men, how to instruct children, how to build shelters. Perhaps, most important of all, he has learned that he will have to keep on learning and remembering or he might die in a very sudden and bloody manner, just as he has seen individuals of his tribe die when they forgot some essential crumb of knowledge.

"This is a demanding life. It is full of stress. And the key to survival is memory! That's what takes up most of the room in our skulls. Out of memory comes the learning of relationships, and out of that comes creative change, improvements, reductions of risk. And there is a constant selectivity at work. The inattentive child is eaten by wild dogs. The forgetful man is killed by the snake he should have seen. Those dull of wit are overwhelmed

by the need to remember so many things, and so they perish and the species is improved thereby.

"Mankind, growing ever more adaptable as his brain size increased, survived the three great Ice Ages. He learned to follow great herds of animals near the edge of the ice, and that style of existence fifteen thousand years ago probably foreshadowed the life-style of the herders, who owned their flocks later on. The cave paintings of twenty thousand years ago in Spain and France reveal the things important to man at that time and place, the cultural bias toward the hunt, and the accumulated knowledge of the animals he stalked."

At that moment the power came back on. The little servo mechanisms went pockety queek, and came back to life. I turned the lanterns off and stowed them. I fixed fresh drinks.

As I gave Meyer his drink I said, "Just where the hell are you going with all this?"

"I want to refine it somewhat before I tell you the rest of it."

"Are you showing off?"

"I tend to do that from time to time."

"Thanks for the prehistory lesson."

"Don't take it too seriously. I've taken a few liberties with accepted fact here and there. But so do the archaeologists and the anthropologists. Many of them believe *Australopithecus africanus* was a dead end. Speculation is not a sin. Maybe three hundred thousand years ago is the right date for the appearance of the brain we now possess. What do you feel like eating?"

"I've been thinking about enchiladas, frijoles, huevos, and those little skinny red peppers."

Meyer beamed. "Splendid suggestion!"

Meyer and I ate that night at Raoul's in north Lauderdale. As we finished, another line of storms came rumbling in off the Atlantic and the rain came thrashing down. So we settled back into our booth in the back of the place and ordered another couple of bottles of Dos Equis beer, dark, velvety, and cold.

"To get back to our ancestors," Meyer said.

"I didn't think I had your full attention."

"Sorry about that. It's some kind of involuntary schizophrenia. I keep thinking about ancient man even when I'm talking about something else. For most of that two million years we were discussing, man was a hunter and a forager. But by ten thousand years ago he was cultivating plants, domesticating animals, and building more permanent shelters. Why did he start that? It was a process of logic. If you control your environment, control your food sources, then you do not have to depend on luck. You depend on hard work and on more learning and remembering and handing down to your children and the younger members of the tribe what you have learned and remembered. The animal behavior experts discovered long ago that those animals which have the least amount of trouble living off their environment are the ones with the most curiosity, and the ones likely to have some sense of play. Otters, crows, squirrels, dolphin. Once man regulated his environment he began to have time to be more curious, perhaps more playful.

"Let me underline again, Travis, the importance of memory. Memory was the only record man had. Plants, animals, weather, fire, illness, weapons, warfare, tracking, digging, building, cultivating, birthing, dying, traveling . . . his brain had grown big and

convoluted under the stress of the remembering of all manner of crucial data. He was in a constant sweat to remember, because to forget was to die. With the memories in his head he could begin to build relationships."

"Relationships? What kind?"

"An animal skull would make a cup, and an easier way to drink than to lie flat on the bank of the stream. He kneels in moist clay, sees the round bowl-like depression he leaves in the clay, realizes the shape relationship, wonders if the clay can be dug out of the bank, and dried in the sun. When that doesn't work he wonders if a more strenuous drying, as in the heat of a fire, would make the cup shape more permanent. And so, with a brain able to seek relationships between remembered facts, mankind entered the pottery age seven thousand years ago and, with his sense of mystery and playfulness, began to make symbols in the clay on the sides of his vessels."

He stared across at me, one black eyebrow raised in question, and I nodded. I knew what he meant but did not know where this history lesson was going.

"And in the same process he came up with the needle, the sling, the harness, the button, the hatchet . . . hundreds of homely objects designed to make life easier. And each new device led to refinements and to other related devices. And, four thousand years after he learned to make pottery, he invented the wheel. But I don't want to lose the thread of my argument in a discussion of *things*.

"Inevitably, Travis, man acquired so many artifacts he had to devise some way of keeping track of them. He had gone beyond the capacity of memory. The first writings we know of, other than the famous Code of Hammurabi in 1800 B.C., are records of shipments of goods in the Middle East. Pots and grain and tools. Writing and reading were elitist skills for fifteen hundred years and more, and then along came Johann Gutenberg in the fifteenth century with the invention of movable type. And that is when they began to fill the libraries of the world with the record of mankind, his tools, his history, his wars, famines, voyages, metallurgy, romances, superstitions, inventions . . ."

Then Meyer did an odd thing. He reached across the table

and clamped a thick hand around my forearm just above the wrist. I could feel the pressure of it. His gaze was very intense. "What we did to ourselves, Travis, within the past four hundred years, has been to make memory, as a key to the survival of the individual, obsolete."

He leaned back with a look of satisfaction.

"So keep going," I said.

He shook his head. "Your turn, my friend. I've shown you the rock. Now you have to tip it over and look for the bugs."

"I hate it when you do this."

"No you don't. You have a hard time getting started, but you're always pleased with yourself when you find out you're actually thinking."

I sighed. "Okay. You are saying that mankind got to be king of the hill because for a million years he had to remember a lot of details in the world around him or something might eat him. The brain grew like a muscle."

"A crude analogy, but I'll accept it."

"Thanks. And now memory is not all that critical. I mean you can survive without having to remember much. Like remember to stop at red lights, take your pills, lock your doors. We don't have to stalk anything in the jungle, or remember the shapes of leaves. So that takes away a big problem, doesn't it?"

"Does it create a bigger one?"

It is always irritating when he prods me, and sits back with his blue eyes alert and bright, waiting for me to pick up on the clues.

"I'll give it a shot. Okay. It must mean that a lot of the capacity of the brain is going unused. Are you saying it is going to atrophy?"

"No. What *should* people be doing with that capacity?"

"Give me a clue."

"There's a clue for you in something Mark Twain said. 'The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them.'"

A small light glimmered in the back of my skull. I have my own kind of smarts. My brain works well in its own terrain, but it doesn't follow Meyer's patterns.

"Okay then," I said finally. "Back in prehistory man learned

and remembered everything he had to know about survival in his world. Then he invented so many tricks and tools, he had to invent writing. More stuff got written down than any man could possibly remember. Or use. Books are artificial memory. And it's there when you want it. But for just surviving, you don't need the books. Not any more."

He nodded. "So why are we doing such a poor job surviving as a species, Travis."

"Last I heard there were five billion of us."

"In greater danger with each passing day."

"Is this going to turn into one of your bomb lectures?"

"Not at all. That might be one part of it. Try this for size. The man of a million years ago used exposure, experience, and all his senses to acquire, in memory, a useful picture of reality. His world was small in scope, limited to what he could see, hear, taste, eat, kill, carry, and use. The world today, to the man walking in a wilderness, is still the same size. But to the man who can read and also remember, it is huge and it is monstrously complicated. The man who can read and remember and ponder the big realities is a man keyed to survival of the species. These big realities are the history of nations, cultures, religions, politics, and the total history of man—from biology to technology. He does not have to read *everything*. That's an asinine concept. He should have access to everything, but have enough education to differentiate between slanted tracts and balanced studies, between hysterical preachings and carefully researched data.

"Another critical reality is the geography of nations and the world, from the movement of tectonic plates to the disappearing of the rain forests, from the breeding of resistant strains of grain to the increasing lifelessness of the sea, from the melting of ice caps to the history of the great changes of climate on the globe, from famines to abundance.

"And a critical area is that of the physical condition of man, the curious inner storms that warp his mind and leave him unable to perceive reality, the role of DNA in his body cells, the probable future medical skill of controlling genetic heritage, the history of plagues and superstitions about the body, the present ability of science to prolong life beyond the point where it has

any meaning left, the role of health care and welfare, the current infestation of mind-rotting drugs.

"The final critical reality is the reality of science, a geometric progression of discovery and implementation, space flight and toxic wastes, genetic engineering and acid rain, microchips and endangered species. To be aware of the world you live in you must be aware of the constant change wrought by science, and the price we pay for every advance.

"These are our realities, and, like our ancestors of fifty thousand years ago, if we—as a species rather than as an individual—are uninformed, or careless, or indifferent to the facts, then survival as a species is in serious doubt.

"How do we relate to reality? How do we begin to comprehend it? By using that same marvelous brain our ancestor used. By the exercise of memory. How do we stock the stores of memory? By reading, Travis. Reading! Complex ideas and complex relationships are not transmitted by body language, by brainstorming sessions, by the boob tube or the boom box. You cannot turn back the pages of a television show and review a part you did not quite understand. You can't carry conversations around in your coat pocket.

"I would not demand that a man read ponderous tomes, or try to read everything—any more than I would expect our ancestor to examine every single leaf on a plant he remembers as being poisonous. I would expect that in his reading—which should be wide ranging, fiction, history, poetry, political science—he would acquire the equivalent of a liberal arts education and acquire also what I think of as the educated climate of mind, a climate characterized by skepticism, irony, doubt, hope, and a passion to learn more and remember more."

"How many of those do we have these days?"

"A pitifully small percentage of the race, and growing smaller every year. Sixty million Americans, one out of every three adults—according to an article I read recently in *Psychology Today*—cannot read well enough to understand a help-wanted ad, or the warning label on household cleaners, or an electric bill, or the instructions on a package of medicine. They are disenfranchised, completely cut off from any knowledge of history, litera-

ture, and science. And because they can't read they become negative role models for their children, who, in their turn, will become a new generation of illiterates, of victims."

"What happened to the schools?"

"The pedagogues decided learning should be fun. For a long time they gave up phonetics and phonetic drill. Learn words by their shape. And they gave up keeping students back until they could pass the class work. There were lots of field trips. Still are. Lots of athletics and games. Kids can slide through without any special effort. Call it the Len Bias syndrome. At the time of his death he had been taking five classes at the University of Maryland, was failing them all, had given up two of them, and had stopped attending the remaining three. He would have been hard pressed to write a third grade theme, a simple three- or four-sentence description of a bunny rabbit. A fabulous athlete with a skull full of wet noodles. Quite obviously his attitude was that he did not *need* all that book shit."

"Maybe he didn't."

"The life unexamined is the life unlived. Can one examine his own life without reference to the realities in which he lives? The political, geographical, historical, philosophical, scientific, religious realities? He does not have to know all aspects with some kind of deadly precision. He has to know the truth of them, the shape and the size, their place in relation to each other. He has to know them in the context to which the reasonable and rational and thoughtful men of his times have assigned them."

"Why?"

Meyer frowned. "I'm wandering a bit. I should come up with a good analogy, something that will nail it down. Something to pull it together. I'll have to depend on my constructive insomnia. At three in the morning I'll work out something."

"I can hardly wait."

"Sarcasm is not your most endearing talent, McGee. It's not raining. It's late. Raoul has walked by us twice, sighing. Poker dollars for the tab?"

He selected one of my dollars and I picked one of his. It had two pair, eights and threes. He came up with three tens. I paid.

We didn't have a chance to talk until the following Tuesday afternoon. It was a fabulous day in Lauderdale. All the hard rains had washed the air clean. The humidity was down in the fifties and the temperature was down into the mid-seventies. We walked across the pedestrian bridge to the beach and Meyer sat in the shade of his favorite tree while I took my forty-five minutes of compulsive behavior—fifteen minutes of trying to run parallel to the beach in waist-deep water—try it, you won't like it. Then a half hour divided between breast stroke, back stroke, crawl, and porpoising, giving each one of them my most strenuous shot. I slowed down by strolling up the beach and back, and was breathing almost normally when I got back into the shade of Meyer's tree. He put his book aside.

"Your energy disheartens me," he said.

"It's all character. And it feels great when I stop."

"I have the analogies all worked out."

"Great. I sort of lost track of where you were going."

"Dos Equis will do that to you. Ready?"

"Fire away."

"That fellow fifty thousand years ago with all the survival memories packed into his head, we will call him Mog for convenience' sake. He is hunting alone in brush country, dressed in hides, spear in his right hand. He is jogging at a pace he can maintain for hours. And he is looking to left and right, searching for signs of something he can eat, or something he does not wish to be eaten by. At times he stops and listens for a long minute, head uptilted, snuffling the breeze. He takes care to travel into the breeze. And from time to time he looks behind him. He has names for the kinds of trees, brush, and grasses. For all the ani-

mals and insects and birds in his part of the world. He knows what to expect from every aspect of his environment. It is all packed into memory. And his intelligence perceives the relationships between the artifacts of his environment.

"Suddenly on the far side of a knoll he comes upon a pyramid of fresh fruit stacked upon broad green leaves. He distances himself from it, moving laterally so that he can keep it in view. There are no trees in that area which bear that variety of fruit, nor any trees or bushes with broad leaves. He is familiar with the act of baiting a trap, and so he looks everywhere except at the fruit, and he listens intently, and he makes a wide and careful circle, testing the air for any strange scent, and studying the ground for any kind of track. He ransacks memory. He knows of no animal which would or could do this. Leaving gifts is not a practice of his people or of any other tribe he has had contact with. His gods are in the hearts of trees, in lightning, in thunder, in hard rain and violent winds. They do not leave gifts.

"And so, because this violates all his experience, all his store of memory, all the reality of his world, he does not go near the fruit. He continues his hunt. We can imagine a younger man appearing hours later, less wary, less informed, more gullible. We can make up some horrid pictures. When he touches the fruit, in that instant giant black pincers erupt out of the dust, grasp him and haul him, screaming, down into the concealed cavern the creature had dug."

"Good grief, Meyer! They need you on the networks."

"An analogy has to have two sides. We go to our modern Mog. We will call him Smith. He has a bachelor of science degree from a state university. He reads a great deal. History, science, philosophy, fiction, natural history, geography, politics. When he comes upon contradictions in what he reads, he is capable of sorting things out and arriving at a reasonable truth of the matter. He knows the shapes of the large realities of the world he lives in. His memory is packed with the information he needs. He knows that ancient Islam used the astrolabe to determine the direction of Mecca, that amino acids are the building blocks of life, that the continents are adrift on tectonic plates. He knows where the Andaman Islands are, and he can identify the constellations."

The lecture was postponed while, without seeming to stare,

we watched three lovely young girls walk by, engaged in animated conversation, with laughter and gestures.

I said to Meyer, "May I quibble? Isn't the world of Smith one hell of a lot more complicated than the world of Mog?"

"I thought so, up to a few years ago. And then I read about the problems people in Africa have trying to insert animals back into the wild after raising them. They have a refuge on the perimeter of one of the parks. Orphaned baby creatures are brought to them. It can take up to ten years of careful exposure before those animals can become totally independent. If they go charging out there without preparation, they are soon dead. It is a more complex environment than you would think. More cruel, more deadly. And the rules are never obvious.

"Now we must have Smith come upon the fruit stacked waiting for him out in the brush country. The shiny ripe fruit on the green leaves. This takes the form of a totally unexpected job offer from a company involved in developing condominium projects. It will pay twice what he is making. And so he walks around it, a very alert and skeptical man. His memory is packed full of data which applies directly and indirectly to this offer from the blue. Sociology, economics, political theory, psychology, business practice. He looks for tracks. He snuffs the breeze. He listens with great care. And he says no thanks. The potential employer is in a high risk area. They have contracts which might not be renewed. Middle management turnover is high."

"But isn't that just common sense, Meyer, to turn it down?"

"Common sense is uncommon, dear boy. And in more cases than you could imagine, it comes from reading widely, and from remembering. In fiction Smith had read about land scams. In magazines he had read about the dubious future of the condominium concept. In newspapers he had read about the banks going under because of bad real estate loans. All these things merged in his mind and added up to No Thanks."

"So the big black pincers didn't reach up out of the dust and grab him by the wallet."

"The nonreader in our culture, Travis, *wants* to believe. He is the one born every minute. The world is so vastly confusing and baffling to him that he feels there *has* to be some simple answer to everything that troubles him. And so, out of pure emptiness,

he will eagerly embrace spiritualism, yoga, a banana diet, or some callous frippery like Dianetics, L. Ron Hubbard's personal path to infinite riches, a strange amalgam of sociological truisms and psychological truths masquerading under invented semi-scientific terms, and sold to the beginner at a nice profit."

Meyer opened the back pages of his book and brought out a newspaper clipping. "This," he said, "is from an editorial in the *American Spectator* written by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., and published in the July 1986 issue. Mr. Tyrrell is a bit of a smart-ass, but he uses the language well. And I quote: 'Here in America, as elsewhere, there will always be tremulous little people of dim intellect and hyperactive imagination, burning for explanations to all life's vicissitudes. They grow impatient with learned analyses of the present. They are defeated by histories that illuminate the past. No species of scholarship or analysis could ever satisfy them; for they need that Wondrous Explanation that will quiet all their fears, thrill them with villains to revile, and never tax their feeble powers of intellection.'

"The same idea was said in a different way by Eric Hoffer, the old dock-walloper, in his book years ago titled *The True Believer.* Hoffer's theory was that the best fanatics are people who have nothing in their heads but wind, smoke, and emptiness. Then if any idea manages to slip in there, it does not matter how insipid or grotesque that idea might be, it will expand to fill all the available emptiness, and it takes over the individual and all his actions. He cannot hear any voice but his own. He is beyond reason, beyond argumentation. He is *right* and everyone who does not believe exactly the same as he is *wrong.*

"There's a lot of it going on lately. True believers who believe that every word in the Bible is the literal truth. Only a grievously uneducated person could believe that. The most elementary course in the history of Christianity will explain that the Bible is a conglomeration of bits and pieces from many varied sources during many different epochs, and that most of it has been translated from one language to another several times, with nuances lost and added all along the way. To take one of the most widely known errors, whether a typo or a flaw in translation, we do not know, the bit about the camel being unable to pass through the

eye of a needle. There is general agreement that there was an arched entrance in the ancient wall of an ancient city, so narrow that it was called The Needle's Eye. A laden camel has cargo slung upon its flanks in such a manner that it could not pass through that gate. An unladen camel could walk through. Thus we have a far more satisfying simile, relating the laden camel to the man laden with riches who could not enter the kingdom of heaven. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of similar errors, leaving many portions of the text without meaning. And even the nonsense passages are not improved by being reprinted in basic fifth-grade English, a recent and deplorable trend.

"The Bible is a powerful piece of ecclesiastical literature, a poetic and historical document. But to believe it is literal truth is nonsense, acceptable only to the gullible. To believe that every word is true demeans the Bible. It insults it. It turns the Bible into some sort of magic talisman with meanings accessible only to the chief wizard. To believe every word is true deprives the reading of the Bible of any meaning and turns it into a magic ceremony, as empty as the spinning of the prayer wheels in the village streets of the Himalayas.

"It is in the interest of unscrupulous men who presume to teach the Word of God to insist that their flock accept the Bible as literal truth. This gives those men the option of translating those parts which seem obscure, translating them into terms which always favor the translator.

"Creationism is a case in point. They want it taught in the schools. What is there to teach? That God created the earth six thousand years ago? They say that it is as respectable a point of view as the *Theory* of Evolution. Out of their abysmal ignorance comes the idea that *theory* in this context means some kind of assumption open to dispute, not yet proven, whereas the word is used in the same way it is used in the *theory* of diminishing returns, or the *theory* of relativity. Those theories are not open to dispute because the proof of their correctness is available to anyone who can read. As to the age of the earth, measure how long it takes the tiny creatures which make up the coral reefs which have become the Florida Keys to build one inch of structure from the sea floor. Divide that time period into the height of the keys

and you get a minimum figure of ten million years. The Himalayas are still rising, still being pushed upward at a measurable inch at a time by the pressure of a vast tectonic plate against the Asiatic land mass. How long did it take to push flat land up into six-mile-high mountains?

"My point is that the man who reads is using the fabulous memory storage and relationship analysis of the brain his ancestors developed aeons ago. He is facilitating his survival in the contemporary world. He will recognize the pockets of fanaticism around him and know what is causing these universal foci of dementia. Of course, he will be called an egg-head or a bleeding heart or a secular humanist, but he can lean back and, in a certain way, *enjoy* the marvelously crackpot rantings of a Jesse Helms, a Botha, a Meese, a Kohmeni, a Falwell, a Qaddafi, a Gorbachev, an Ortega, a Noriega—people from both ends of every spectrum, whooping and leaping and frothing, absolutely livid at the idea their particular warped vision of reality is not shared by everyone. Their basic lack of education, of reading, of being able to comprehend the great truths of reality has left empty places in their heads, into which great mischief has crept."

Inside his head he was pacing back and forth on his private podium, grasping his lecture notes, staring imperiously at his Audience from time to time.

"Hey, Meyer," I said. "I believe you. You've sold me."

He came slowly back down to earth. "Sorry. I do go on, don't I? Give me about a year and I will get this whole concept sorted out. The brain developed over such a brilliant period of our history, the memory refined as a survival tool, and then disuse, ignorance, mischief, disaster. The devil makes work for idle brains. May I make just one more point?"

"Could I stop you?"

"Not easily. Take a quick look at terrorism. In Ireland, in Africa, in the Middle East. Most active terrorists are between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. We keep making the automatic assumption that they know *something* of the world, of history, of politics, of geography. But that assumption is wrong. Totally wrong. They are manipulated by men who have the same thing in their heads that the kids have—nothing but hate, anger, machismo, a sense of fraternity, and access to explosives. Their world is just as tiny as Mog's world. And as dangerous. They hunt their supposed enemies with the cleverness Mog hunted antelope, and care as much about the victims, about their terror and how they die."

"And you have a cure for all this, of course."

"You mock me, Travis. If identifying the disease is the first step toward a cure, then I *may* have taken the first step. Education, literacy, reading, thinking, remembering. Using the brain which was developed by a million years of stress. Just think of all the grotesque, embarrassing concepts which would disappear were we all readers! How about that contingent of nutcakes which swears the Holocaust never happened, that it is all Zionist propaganda? And there are still flat-earth people who say the lights in the night sky are holes in the canopy which covers us. There is a psychiatric mafia which believes that the way to process your average psychopath is to dump him or her out onto the city streets, clutching a lithium prescription he or she is unable to read and unable to get filled. The two mighty nations of the world are like two men locked in a phone booth, each clutching ten hand grenades. This is called Mutually Assured Destruction. The wise men of the two great nations believe the solution lies in making more hand grenades while doing research on projects to keep the other fellow's grenades from exploding. You can dip up a bucket of ocean water anywhere in the world and find traces of oil and plastic in it. The polar ice caps are beginning to melt. The forests are disappearing. There is a current rapid rate of desertification throughout the world. There are five billion of us now, and yet a bumbling old man marches around the world denouncing birth control in the name of religion. Fanatic nuts, meriting Hoffer's diagnosis of them, bomb abortion clinics in some kind of paroxysm of elitism. Were abortion illegal, only the women of means could afford to go to more enlightened countries for medical services. Bleak, my boy. Bleak indeed. And so let us trudge back toward home, and stop at the bar at the Seaview for something tall and cold, with rum in it."

"Beautifully said," I told him.

On the way back I told him that he had made me feel guilty

about my frivolous reading fare of late, and what might I read that would patch up my comprehension and my conscience at the same time.

Meyer thought about it until we had our drinks. He took a sip, sighed and said, "I'll lend you my copy of Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*."

I am halfway through it. And the world has a different look, a slightly altered reality. That fourteenth century was the pits!

AFTERWORD

JOHN D. MACDONALD died on December 28, 1986, only a few months after completing *Reading for Survival*. We present his essay unedited as a strong statement on reading by one of America's favorite and best-read authors.

As Jean Trebbi, executive director of the Florida Center for the Book, explains below, MacDonald agreed to write this essay in the fall of 1985. Soon after, he had second thoughts, fearing his effort would be just another example of "preaching to the converted." He wrote me, however, that one way to make his words "fall usefully upon deaf ears is to use such colorful language that it will be quoted, sooner or later, to a great many nonreaders." If this was acceptable, he would write the essay. I paused, but of course said "yes."

I heard nothing for several months and wrote Mr. MacDonald, having learned from our earlier correspondence that the telephone was not a good way to communicate with him (in fact, he had explained, "I would rather stick a fork in my eye than initiate a phone call"). I consulted with Jean Trebbi, and it turned out that she had seen a draft of the essay but that neither she nor the author was satisfied.

In late summer 1986, the manuscript arrived. Or, in MacDonald's words, "the mountain has labored and brought forth a small, mangy, bad-tempered mouse of 7200 words." He explained further: "I could not make the essay work, and I could not imagine why. I must have done two hundred pages of junk. Then Jean Trebbi wrote asking me why didn't I use the device of a conversation between McGee and Meyer. Why indeed? . . . I am very sorry for taking so damn long."

MacDonald's dialogue between his fictional characters McGee and Meyer about reading was unlike anything I had read. It *is* somewhat bad-tempered, but it also is thought-provoking. Those who read it or hear it (or perhaps someday see it enacted) will remember it.

I am grateful to Jean Trebbi for persuading John MacDonald to pursue this topic. Like all Center for the Book projects, this publication is supported by private, tax-deductible contributions from individuals and corporations. The Center for the Book, a partnership between the private sector and the U.S. government, was established by Congress in 1977 to stimulate public interest in books, reading, and the printed word. The Florida Center for the Book, cosponsor of this publication, is located at the Broward County Library in Fort Lauderdale. It was established in 1984 and was the first statewide affiliate of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. There are now eleven state affiliates, each working with us "to keep the book flourishing" by celebrating, exploring, and promoting books and reading in America.

It is particularly appropriate that this essay, written by such a popular and respected author, should be published in 1987, which Congress and the President, at the instigation of the Center for the Book, have designated as "The Year of the Reader."

John Y. Cole
Director, The Center for the Book
in the Library of Congress

IN SEPTEMBER 1985, John D. MacDonald graciously put aside his dislike of interviews in general—and television interviews in particular—and agreed to be videotaped for "Library Edition," a television show I host. This interview was part of "Let's Talk About It," a reading discussion series sponsored by the American Library Association and the National Endowment for the Humanities. MacDonald sensed the unique elements of a program in which his Travis McGee novel, *A Tan and Sandy Silence,* was to be read and discussed along with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone With the Wind.* He accepted a second invitation for an interview, as long as it would be taped in Sarasota, his Florida home.

The bright studio lights were dimmed and the planned interview was over, when a chance remark prompted MacDonald to start talking about reading, readers, and nonreaders. It was apparent that he had given the subject serious thought and seemed eager to talk and write about it. I told him I was certain that the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress would be interested in his thoughts and that the Florida Center for the Book and the LC Center would like to publish such a piece as a joint venture. A great admirer of Barbara Tuchman, MacDonald recalled her highly regarded essay "The Book," which she wrote for the Center for the Book, and he agreed to the proposal.

Reading for Survival was a difficult essay for John MacDonald to write, and I was privileged to be able to discuss the essay with him while he was working on it. The result of his efforts is a deeply personal statement that we are pleased to share with others. I am indebted to the American Library Association, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the State Library of Florida, and the Broward County Public Library for providing me the opportunity to be instrumental in the publication of the essay.

We shall miss John MacDonald, but we shall continue to enjoy the rich legacy of his work. One of the purposes of the Florida Center for the Book is to encourage appreciation of Florida's book culture, promoting a closer relationship between those who create books and those who read them. In this spirit, on Febru-

ary 21, 1987, the Florida center was one of the sponsors of the dedication of a plaque at the Bahia Mar Hotel and Yachting Center that honors MacDonald and the *Busted Flush,* the home of Travis McGee, "fictional hero and salvage consultant." The plaque is at boat slip F18.

Jean Trebbi
Executive Director
Florida Center for the Book

A NOTE ON THE TYPE

New Baskerville, as its name implies, is a redesign of John Baskerville's 1762 original typeface. The most recent of many adaptations, it was revised in 1978 by Mergenthaler Linotype Company and comes with three additional weights, including italics for each.

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