



Cinnamon Skin

John D. MacDonald

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When Travis McGee's friend Meyer lent his boat to his niece Norma, and her new husband Even, the boat exploded out in the waters of the Florida Keys. Travis McGee thinks it's no accident, and clues lead him to ponder possibilities of drugs and also to wonder where Evan was when his wife was killed....

"Proves again that MacDonald keeps getting better with each new adventure."

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Cinnamon Skin Details

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From Reader Review Cinnamon Skin for online ebook

Kemper says

Every time I read this book I end up humming Neil Young's *Cinnamon Girl* the entire time so it's a relief to finish it and put a stop to that particular ear worm.

Travis McGee's best buddy Meyer has loaned his houseboat to his niece and her new husband for their honeymoon while he's away at a conference. Unfortunately, somebody blows up the boat as they're going out on a fishing trip and all aboard are killed. (Providing more evidence for my theory that nothing good ever happens on a boat.) A South American terrorist group claims responsibility for the bombing, but that makes no sense to Meyer who asks Travis to help him find whoever was responsible.

McGee starts poking around and comes across evidence that the new hubby wasn't on the boat after all. Pulling on that thread puts them on the trail of a mystery man with a chilling pattern of seduction and murder for profit. The other wrinkle here is that Meyer is recovering from a very bad moment in a previous book so catching his niece's killer is a way to regain his nerve.

As usual when I reread one of these John D. MacDonald novels I find a lot I liked with some very good insights of what society was becoming mixed with some incredibly dated sexist attitudes. Travis and Meyer make for a good partnership of detective/con men, and a lot of good stuff comes from them trying to backtrack someone just based on some casual anecdotes he told them over dinner one night. MacDonald also uses McGee to muse on where the world is headed and really hit the nail on the head regarding some predictions about the growing computer age of the early '80s.

Yet Travis still has to give a mostly platonic female friend a pat on the butt in appreciation of a job well done. In fairness, the books got better in terms of this from their start in the '60s, and a big subplot here is that Travis is having relationship troubles with his current lady that are dealt with in a surprisingly adult fashion that gives equal time to her point of view.

The overall improvement of McGee's relationships with women, and the personal angle of Meyer's involvement make this one a better than average book in the series.

Nancy Moore says

I've read all of this series and loved every one. I read them in order - I always read a series in order, in fact, I'm compulsive about it - because I like to follow the character's life and the author's writing as they both grow. Mr. MacDonald never disappointed - each one is a great thrill ride and they got better each time. Read my review on "The Deep Blue Good-by" (from Wikipedia) to meet Travis, and get ready for some great reading!

Bobby Underwood says

"When you despair of what passes for storytelling in today's dumbed-down video 'culture,' I have a

prescription that works every time: Return to the Masters. Turn on some Gershwin, Ellington, Cole Porter, curl up, and open the first page of a John D. McDonald novel. You shall be restored!" — Joseph Wambaugh

There are several books in this landmark series by John D. MacDonald that resonate beyond those tidy labels people enjoy placing on books — so that they can categorize them as this or that — and this is one of them. I've always thought it was a shame that Cinnamon Skin came just before MacDonald's swan song, *The Lonely Silver Rain*, because it gets overshadowed by the final entry. Though *Lonely Silver Rain* deserves the praise it receives, in many ways, *Cinnamon Skin* is a rich and mature novel with moments both poignant and powerful. It contains as much insight into the frail human condition as anything the author ever wrote. Sandwiched between the fun and thrilling *Free Fall in Crimson*, and *The Lonely Silver Rain*, that chronological three-book stretch late in the series rivals that of *A Deadly Shade of Gold/Bright Orange* for the *Shroud/Darker Than Amber* in the early years as MacDonald's absolute best. There were other great ones, and some really good ones, but they alternated. The sustained excellence of those two separate three-book stretches of excellence in the series written nearly twenty years apart is astounding.

Cinnamon Skin is one of the most personal narratives of the series. A surprising number of the entries had some personal connection, but usually for McGee. This time, it's more personal for Meyer —

"She wasn't at all pretty, but being in love made her beautiful."

That statement describes Meyer's niece, Norma, who is blown sky high in Meyer's boat while he's away in Toronto trying to find the dignity taken from him by Desmin Grizzel near the end of *Free Fall in Crimson*. Geologist Norma Lawrence was not alone, however. She was honeymooning with Evan, who along with McGee's old friend, Hack, also got blown to bits. To add to Meyer's loss, a group calling themselves the Liberation Army of Chile has taken credit, apparently targeting Meyer, but killing his niece and husband by mistake.

A year has passed since the incidents in *Free Fall in Crimson* and it has certainly been a devastating one for Travis McGee's best pal. McGee and Meyer's gal-pal Aggie Sloane had cooked up the Toronto lecture just to get Meyer back in the game, walking among the living. McGee is still with Annie as *Cinnamon Skin* opens, but the seeds for a bittersweet parting begin taking root when Annie is offered the resort in Hawaii to manage. She wants McGee to pick up his stuff and come with her. Like Spenser and Hawk in Parker's series, which came later, there is something at McGee's core she can't quite reach, the part which enables him to do what he does, and to live as he does, and it bothers her.

When McGee sees a photo taken moments before the explosion, however, all that is interrupted. McGee begins to explore, very quietly, the unthinkable. Once he is certain, he must tell Meyer. Soon, the two are following a bloody trail all the way to Texas, and Mexico. It will end deep in the Yucatán, in the jungle. Along the way the reader is privy to human pain and regret, and some of the most keenly drawn characters in the series. The narrative is sad and moving, Meyer's loss and need for revenge also his road to reclaim what he lost at the hands of Grizzel in *Free Fall in Crimson*. The story-line gives both McGee and Meyer an opportunity to ruminate on life and death, and the human condition. In addition, we get a wonderful piece of writing by McDonald from the feminine perspective, when he finds love letters Norma had written to Evan which cast a light on their relationship. Meyer is the one who eventually ruminates about Norma's death, and a dream he's been having, in a car ride with McGee:

"Death is an unending rerun until the last person with any memory of you is also dead."

Once they begin backtracking the steps of Norma's husband, they discover one sad ending after another. The trail leads McGee and Meyer to people touched by a man who is seemingly without conscience. But then Sergeant Paul Sigiera paints a picture even more disturbing; a terrible incident in the past may have lain the foundation for a man with more names than Elvis had hit singles, to become what he has now become. Always a gentle man, economist Meyer wants to at least understand the killer before bringing about justice, or even vengeance. But McGee has seen too much violence and death, and knows how dangerous that road can be. McGee is having none of it:

"You start with the assumption that everybody is peachy, and then something comes along and warps them. You start with a concept of goodness, and so what we are supposed to do as a society is understand why they turn sour. I start with the assumption that there is such a thing as evil which can exist without causation. The black heart which takes joy in being black."

It is a description which certainly applies to the man they're searching for, as McGee and Meyer con their way through friends and even relatives, to find him. The search itself provides poignant moments, and reflections from both men on the price paid for conning their way into someone's life. Meyer reflects on such after one such visit has deadly, unexpected consequences:

"I feel very sad and soiled and old. She really hasn't anything left."

Out of their element, McGee knows he'll need help, and finds it in the form of a beautiful woman of Mayan and Toltec lineage named Barbara Castillo. Barbara will enlist the help of Mayan natives as they trek through the jungle after an evil man with a friendly face and manner. By the time McGee and Meyer find 'Evan' it's clear that both Meyer and McGee were right in their psychological appraisal. There are wonderfully informative moments about the Mayan culture interwoven into the narrative by MacDonald. And he gives us not only a great story of retribution, but a look inward by McGee, as the tarnished knight comes to terms with what Annie wants, and what he's able to give her:

"You have been living your life on your own terms. You need make only those concessions which please you. There are always funny friends, parties, beach girls, and the occasional dragon to go after. I don't pretend to know the circumstances that shaped you. I would guess that at some time during your formative years there was an incident that gave you a distaste for most kinds of permanence." — Friend/Lover Dr. Laura Honneker to Travis McGee

A great story with grounded psychological underpinnings, perceptive observations about society and the human condition, and tremendous atmosphere as it draws to an exciting conclusion, *Cinnamon Skin* is one of the finest novels in a long series so littered with them, it became one of the great sagas in American fiction. Highly recommended!

* As a footnote, if you're wondering about the title of this one, it is in reference to Barbara Castillo, the lovely Mayan woman who helps McGee and Meyer track a killer — and has her own reasons for vengeance. But it is also a Spanish song made reference to in *Cinnamon Skin*. Here is a link to Eydie Gorme's wonderful version of the song — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVNf...>

Leslie says

3.5*

A solid entry in the McGee series. This one could be read as a stand-alone but benefits if the reader is familiar with the previous book, *Free Fall in Crimson*.

Manybooks says

The 20th of John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee novels, Cinnamon Skin is both one of the saddest and most heart-breaking instalments as well as probably being amongst my absolute favourites of the series, as it is a novel that basically and almost entirely features a storyline centred around Meyer, Travis McGee's intellectual and academic PhD in economics sidekick and still one of my favourite literary characters ever, a true and lasting literary crush. And although the plot itself is really and truly saddening, even anger-inducing and infuriating (with Meyer losing both his only living relative, his cherished niece, and his house, his boat, in a horrible explosion that turns out to have been instigated by Nora's new husband who was originally thought to have also been killed), the way that Meyer and McGee go about solving the mystery, the fact that McGee puts EVERYTHING aside and on hold to support his best friend, to find out what happened, to locate the culprit and make him pay for what he has wrought, what he has done, this always makes me both cry with anguish, with feeling, and smile with gladness and much happy appreciation.

Now I guess I could have done without the fear and emerging terror when it appears as though Meyer might have been killed, might in fact be dead, but Cinnamon Skin is a mystery and these types of scenarios are part and parcel to the genre, although if John D. MacDonald had actually chosen to dispatch of Meyer, if he had chosen to actually have killed him off, I for one, would have been both simply furious and livid, as Meyer is basically the only reason I keep reading John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee series, for while I can appreciate the eponymous hero, while I can even somewhat enjoy Travis McGee as a character, without Meyer, the series basically means nothing much at all to and for me (and I am truly sad therefore, that Cinnamon Skin is the second to last of the Travis MacGee series, that there is only one more instalment left, sigh). Highly recommended for fans of the Travis McGee series (and especially for fans of McGee's sidekick Meyer), Cinnamon Skin works well enough as a stand alone, although for completists, the novel immediately preceding Cinnamon Skin, Free Fall in Crimson should perhaps also be considered, although not having read the latter is not really that much of a potential issue, as the events of Free Fall in Crimson and how they have a bearing on Cinnamon Skin are more than adequately summarised and described, when during the first few pages of the latter novel, John D. MacDonald sets the stage as to why Meyer is away at a conference and why and how his niece Nora and her as it turns out to be lethally evil new husband are living aboard Meyer's boat on their honeymoon.

Jenna says

Another breathtaking adventure of Travis McGee down Yucatan, Mexico with an economist friend Meyer. Hunting the hunters of women..... a big, bad, predator. A jack-of-all-trades, a con man whom able to device his guiles to ensnare vulnerable women, and used his charisma as a gambit then kill them for it.

His motive:

He's a hunter a loner, and women are the game he specializes. A man who seems affable, agreeable, gregarious, fun to have around. That is his act. That is his camouflage suit, and every move calculated. The money is important to him only because it gives him the freedom to keep hunting. ~~~Travis McGee~~~

When Meyer an econommist.....Travis McGee's friend ask his help to look into his Maynard Keynes boat who was blown with a huge explosion bits and pieces left by some terrorist down his niece, and newly-wed husband Evan Lawrence with it.

Doubtful McGee started to suspect that its not the terrorist who blow-away Meyers boat, but its just a red herring to conceal a crime. He realizes that he has to entrap this dangerous killer with the help of Meyer, and Barbara.

Tony says

CINNAMON SKIN. (1982). John D. MacDonald. ***.

McGee had arranged a lecture tour for Meyer in Toronto. Without advance knowledge, Meyer's only remaining blood relative, his niece, and her newly acquired husband decided to visit Meyer at the same time. As a poor substitute, Meyer lets them stay on his houseboat, and provides them with a captain who can take them around his waters as a kind of honeymoon. When the boat is out at sea, a huge explosion rips through it, sending it immediately to the bottom, along with Meyer's niece and her husband and the skipper. If Meyer hadn't been lecturing, he would have been destroyed too. But...was it his niece's husband that was realty on board? Suddenly we are confronted with a mystery man, a man who marries frequently under a variety of names, and disposes of his wives after making off with all their money. This is a good thriller with fast pacing and good characterizations. Recommended.

Ji?í Pavlovský says

Se ?tením jsem za?al fakt hodn? brzo, což m?lo za následek, že jsem se ke spoust? autor? dosta? moc brzo. ?ili jsem Travise McGeeho ?etl n?kdy kolem patnácti let a v té dob? jsem to bral jako klasickou drsnou školu. Zajímala m? akce, hlášky, ob?as n?jaké kozy a tak dále.

Vrátil jsem se k n?mu teprve letos... a zatracen? m? to p?ekvapilo, jak je to dosp?lá, nehysterická a stále moderní detektivka. Jak málo od doby svého vzniku zestárla. Hlavn? je to v tom, že MacDonaldovi obrovsky fungují postavy. Nejsou vyložen? jednorozm?rné. Princezna v ohrožení je tak trochu d?vka. Hlavní hrdina je sice rytí? bez bázn? a hany, ale zárove? má odpor k závazk?m a s tím vyplývající depky z marnosti života. I o sv?t? kolem tu autor skrz svého hrdinu neuvažuje jen v rovin? cynické hlášky, ale fakt se snaží o n?m p?emýšlet a k n??emu dojít. Ani dialogy tu nejsou postavené na hláškách nebo na šoku, ale jsou civilní, p?esv?d?ivé a budují v?rohodné postavy. Když se postava hroutí, není to na efekt. Všechno je to hodn? tlumené a podehrávané. A líbilo se mi i to, že hrdina nemusí být za každou cenu nejchyt?ejší v místnosti. Naopak, jeho „watson“ je ?asto ten, který posu?uje vyšet?ování. Nebo i oby?ejný polda, se kterým si hrdina promluví.

Pokud bych n?co považoval spíš za nevýhodu je to, že to ?asto není p?íliš detektivka. V Tmavší než jantar je v podstat? všechno od za?átku jasné a jen to mí?í ke svému cíli. Chybí i n?jaká finální konfrontace s padouchy. I ve Sko?icové pleti je od první t?etiny jasné, kdo za tím v?zí – pak už se jen hledá a zjiš?uje se, co všechno má na sv?domí. Jen Dlouhý levandulový pohled má n?jaké odhalení pachatele. Ale ono o to fakt

ani moc nejde. Jde to tu atmosféru, o melancholický pocit, o charaktery.

Ale asi díky tomu, že MacDonald nemá velký tah na bránu, nikdy u nás moc nevycházel. Tedy, n?co vyšlo po revoluci, ale v naprosto d?svém p?ekladu lidí, nad kterými by i google p?eklada? ohrnul nos. Škoda. MacDonald je autorem dosp?lých román? drsné školy.

Henri Moreaux says

In this, the second last in the series, McGee's trusty friend still recovering from his clash with Dirty Bob in the prior novel now finds his houseboat destroyed in an apparent terrorist attack and his niece & her husband who were aboard are killed. Meyer goes to Travis for help and a cross country adventure and investigation ensues.

Smoothly flowing novel, asides from the absence of modern technology it's hard to tell it's nearly 40 years old.

JoAnna Spring says

You are going to be so sick of me telling you how much I love Travis McGee. No really, you are. There are 21 books, and having just read the penultimate novel, I've decided to start at the beginning again, rather than read the last book. I'm just not ready to live in a world where there are no new McGees for me to read.

But more on that later. Today, we're gushing over *Cinnamon Skin*, which was written in 1982 and is the next-to-last book in the series. Quick plot recap, because apparently some people (such as my husband) think that "plot" is an important part of novels....

Travis McGee and his best bud Meyer live on houseboats in Florida. One day, while Meyer is in Canada lecturing about economics, his boat is blown up, killing a fishing guide his niece and her new husband, Evan. Or perhaps not. Apparently Evan is the real sketchy sort who floats around the country, gets women to fall in love with him and then kills them. McGee and Meyer set out to track Evan down and reconstruct his past. They end up in Texas, upstate New York and Mexico. They meet a lot of people and do a bit of sleuthing. There is a showdown. People get shot. The end.

If you are my husband and read a book for the story, *Cinnamon Skin* is routine hard-boiled fiction. If you are romantic, and fall in love with philosophical beach bums who run into more than their fair share of trouble, *Cinnamon Skin* is a story of devotion.

McGee and Meyer have that sitting-on-the-balcony-deconstructing-the-world-drinking-scotch kind of relationship - except their balconies are boats, and I think they prefer gin. Their years of friendship has led to complete trust and understanding of each other, so when Meyer thinks he might need Trav's professional detective assistance to track down evil Evan, Trav is insulted at Meyer's reluctance to impose.

Meyer speaks first:

"You'd come help out if I come upon anything like that?"

"Gee, I don't really know. I have these tennis matches with the ambassador's daughter, and I've been thinking of getting my teeth capped. You know how it is."

"I'll pay all expenses."

"For Christ's sweet sake, Meyer!"

"I'm sorry. It's just that I'm not at home in the world the way I was."

"You holler, I'll come running."

I love that author John MacDonald writes dialogue without exposition. He's created strong characters and carefully crafts conversations so I know just how Meyer and McGee are speaking without having to be told "Meyer asked timidly" or "Travis reassured him." That's the talent of a good writer who respects the intelligence of his readers.

MacDonald also had a talent for philosophizing on the workings of the world in a way that still feels totally relevant nearly 30 (or 50) years later. These bits are my absolute favorite parts, so please indulge a large excerpt here at the end.

A lead has taken Meyer and McGee to Utica, a small city in Central New York. In a restaurant bar, McGee notices a group of young political professionals with "feverish gregariousness" and wonders why they "seemed so frantic about having a good time." Meyer's response nearly made me cry. My heart is in CNY. It's where I went to college, became my own person and fell in love. John MacDonald grew up there, and I think we share the same regret for the direction the region is heading.

Meyer studied the question and finally said, "It's energy without a productive outlet, I think.

Most of these Mohawk Valley cities are dying, have been for years: Albany, Troy, Amsterdam, Utica, Syracuse, Rome. And so they make an industry out of government. State office buildings in the decaying downtowns. A proliferation of committees, surveys, advisory boards, commissions, legal actions, grants, welfare, zoning boards, road departments, health care groups... thousands upon thousands of people making a reasonably good living working for city, county, state and federal governments in these dwindling cities, passing the same tax dollars back and forth. I think that man, by instinct, is productive. He wants to *make* something, a stone ax, a bigger cave, better arrows, whatever. But these bright and energetic men know in their hearts they are not *making* anything. They use every connection, every contact, every device to stay within reach of public monies. Working within an abstraction is just not a totally honorable way of life. Hence the air of jumpy joy, the backslaps ringing too loudly, compliments too extravagant, toasts too ornate, marriages too brief, lawsuits too long-drawn, obligatory forms too complex and too long. Their city has gone stale and as the light wanes, they dance."

Dave says

Although sometimes categorized as a mystery series, the McGee series may borrow some ideas from mysteries, but it is a series about as far from the standard PI genre as can be. McGee is not a PI. He's a salvage consultant. When someone loses something of value and the normal lawful means of getting it back are not sufficient, he figures out how to outfox the conmen and tries to net a fifty percent profit of the haul. He lives on a houseboat in the Bahai Mar Marina on the Florida Coast. Often, he confronts conmen, swindlers, and just mean ones, but he is about as unofficial and off-the-books as they come.

In this novel, trouble comes home to the Bahai Mar Marina and the John Maynard Keynes is blown up with

three people on it and not enough left of anyone to bury. This is a story of a man with good looks and charm and wit who can sell anything to anyone and practically hypnotize any woman and when her accounts are cleaned out, he's gone without a trace. There's a trail of broken bodies and broken souls ranging across half the country and the trail is ice cold. There's no client in this one and very little left to salvage. --- just a battle with absolute evil in its most devilishly charming form.

Much of this story is about the investigation that McGee and Meyer take into the conman's troubled pasts and the ghosts they awaken as they try to nudge people's memories. Despite the fact that it may be more cerebral than action-oriented, It is a compelling read from page one through to the end. This is MacDonald writing in his most carefully crafted, mature form. I really enjoyed this book.

Cindy says

I do not remember which Travis McGee mystery I read first, but I can assure you I read them all. I remember this color in MacDonald's color-themed mysteries--but that only means it was probably a more recent one. There was something comforting about returning over and over again to his world on the water, on the Busted Flush, his houseboat in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I liked his best friend Meyer, the economist, his neighbor, on the John Maynard Keynes. Meyer was as well-known and well-regarded an academic as Travis was unknown and anonymous. There may not have been many variations in character or plot, but I loved the consistency of this man and his friend in a world that never stopped changing, from the 1960s to the 1980s. For me, first there was Travis McGee, then Spenser, and then Harry Bosch.

Chad Malkamaki says

One of the better McGee stories, a good plot, Travis in old age is not as creepy, and another buddy adventure with Meyer. What more can you ask for?

Darwin8u says

I think this is my sixth MacDonald (and fifth Travis McGee) novel. There is something trashy but smooth about all of MacDonald's work. They are probably mid-tier pulp from a plot standpoint, but woven throughout each is a bunch of philosophy, economics and politics that braids the novels with a form of libertarian conservatism that is kinda attractive. This isn't Ayn Rand trash. This is John D. MacDonald. So the politics/economics/philosophy is soft, the writing is good, and the covers are all soft-core.

The math with John D., however, is interesting. His plots can wobble (meh to great), his political philosophy can also move and vary (meh to great), as does his writing about women and sex (ugh to blah). Generally, I prefer his books when the politics is dialed up, the sex is dialed down, and the plot is hard and fast. Cinnamon Skin came through. It wasn't brilliant, but it made my flight from Phoenix to Dallas easy. Hopefully, the person who finds my yellowed copy in Seat 14D will appreciate it as much as I did.

Harv Griffin says

In DREADFUL LEMON Trav's boat gets wrecked by a bomb: Trav wakes up in the hospital; ditto Busted Flush, which still floats. But John D. is on a roll here. In CINNAMON SKIN Meyer's boat John Maynard Keynes is blasted into tiny scraps of floating debris, while Meyer was giving a speech ashore, but Meyer's niece Norma and new hubby were borrowing the boat.

Meyer: "We're each expert in our own death."

The Feds descend on an incompetent terrorism investigation that changes into a drug smuggling investigation (well, CINNAMON was ©1982), but Travis quickly suspects that Norma's husband was not aboard during the explosion.

Travis: "And so I am separated from my own true love by fifty-three proctologists?"

Lots of Meyer in this one, which is a bonus. Now, John D. is famous for using his novels to sneak in social commentary riffs. Some readers hate it; some love it.

From CINNAMON: *...we passed one shop which sold computers, printers, software, and games. It was packed with teenagers, the kind who wear wire rims and know what the new world is about. The clerks were indulgent, letting them program the computers. Two hundred yards away, near the six movie houses, a different kind of teenager shoved quarters into the space-war games, tensing over the triggers, releasing the eerie sounds of extraterrestrial combat. Any kid back in the computer store could have told the combatants that because there is no atmosphere in space, there is absolutely no sound at all. Perfect distribution: the future managers and the future managed ones. Twenty in the computer store, two hundred in the arcade.*

That piece of the riff has haunted me for two decades. But there are things in this novel that haunt me more, like the serial killer and destroyer of many women that Travis and Meyer are hunting.

@hg47
