



# The Neon Jungle

*John D. MacDonald*

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## **The Neon Jungle** John D. MacDonald

The Varaki family run the local grocery store, but tragedy hits the family hard. The sudden death of the matriarch of the clan is followed by the favourite son's death in Korea. The teenage daughter falls in with a bad crowd and there's also the other son, Walter, who has been dipping into the till to fund his escape from Doris, his sharp-tongued wife. Then there are the villains . . .

When their lives intersect the action builds to a bloody and explosive conclusion...

## **The Neon Jungle Details**

Date : Published January 1984 by Ballantine Books (first published 1953)

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Author : John D. MacDonald

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# From Reader Review The Neon Jungle for online ebook

## Mike Merrill says

Another John MacDonald story. Great page turner!

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## wally says

another from macdonald...he has a pile of stories, hey? i mean a big hopping pile of stories and in this kindle edition dean koontz gushes about the stories, says he...forget the word he used...but he ignored the stories for some time before he read one/some and was hooked, read many over and over.

i've read a few from macdonald...something blue...figured to give a few of them a go...see what gives. onward and upward.

finished...good story...reminds me of watching a play...a black and white t-v show from the ago...small cast of characters nothing more nothing less...conflict...resolution. something about social issues mayhap. bull of a cop...once bad always bad...social worker once bad possible to change...others who fit that billing. bonnie...there, i think i was looking for more...something...more information, a reason why...had a sense of being told rather than being shown.

curious manner, the telling...a kind of flyover...things in general, neon...then to the particulars...

had this sense of a scientist who is somewhat interested in the take, but not invested in it...black red some win some lose...no real sense of...what is the word? passion. no sense of that looking into the abyss the abyss looking back at you...or how's it s'posed to go...something about obsessions...have your obsessions and your obsessions having you...there is that sense in this story...macdonald tossing in ingredients.

and heh! there's this line or two at the end that brings to mind the old black and white shows...the guy grabbing girl...this sense of that's okay. ha ha ha ha! i can imagine some of the more enlightened crowd reading this and taking a dim view of some happenings herein.

good writing...seemingly accurate portrayals save for bonnie, who seems...unreal or something. she played such a large role in the story...and you know...perhaps she embodies that sense of the disinterested scientist...only concerned about her own navel...and then she is awakened from that slumber. hmmm. i dunno. onward, upward.

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## Jim Davis says

While not a big fan of the Travis McGee stories I really enjoy MacDonald's early stories. This is no exception. there is a whole lot going on here with various people's lives intersecting. Many of these lives are dysfunctional for many reasons. The story revolves around the extended Varaki family in a small city in 1953. It is initially a happy family that is torn apart by a series of occurrences that greatly impact the lives of those who live and work in the Varaki family store. Each character brings a whole life history that colors

their reactions to these events. MacDonald does a great job of bringing out the often sordid and tragic events that make these people who they are and ultimately what happens to each of them.

Here are the characters:

Gus the patriarch and his young second wife Janna.

Henry, the son who dies in the Korean War early in the story.

Bonny, the broken, battered woman Henry tried to save by marrying her and who becomes a part of the Varaki family.

Walter, the spineless other son and his waspish wife Doris.

Teena, the young daughter who turns bad under the pressure of Henry's death and the increased morbid tone of the house that results.

Paul, the optimistic parole officer who works with Gus to get jobs for young men he thinks are salvageable.

Rowell, the bitter detective who thinks people are either good or bad and once a kid breaks the law they never go back.

Vern, the parole working for the Varaki's with zero empathy who is only concerned with not getting caught the next time.

Jim, the parole working for the Varaki's who wants to go straight

MacDonald does a great job of weaving a tough, gritty, almost noirish story that weaves the lives of these characters together to produce a jolting, explosive result. The pace builds inexorably page by page to the unexpected ending driven by the societal, economic and psychological tensions always present in these characters lives.

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## **Charles says**

Great book, but then all of JDM's pretty much are.

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## **Barbara Nutting says**

WOW - this book was written in 1953 but could have been written yesterday - timeless!! It doesn't take place in Florida or the gulf region which surprised me, as all of his other books I've read do. This could have taken place anytime or anywhere. One of his VERY BEST!!

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## **Benoit Lelièvre says**

That was DARK.

To a point I was unsettled by the end and I'm not the easily unsettled kind. The Neon Jungle is a post-war Shakespearean tragedy about a family coming apart, following the death of the prodigal son Henry in Korea. It feels like a Coen brothers-inspired novel that takes itself seriously. John D. MacDonald is obviously a master at what he does. His characters are powerful and memorable, but his dedication to their obliteration is haunting.

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## **Matt Lenz says**

I'm a big fan of John D. MacDonald, one of the last century's most prolific thriller authors, only back when he wrote, they didn't call them thrillers or crime thrillers, they just called them best sellers. The Neon Jungle came out in 1953, and I always caution myself to overlook the bumps that may be caused by clear historical differences between then and now. Other than painting a picture of a simpler time, like going to the meat market versus today's mega stores, the differences weren't that great. The title connotes somewhat of a sinister story, but, I was shocked by how lawlessness then is almost exactly like lawlessness is now. The Neon Jungle is a good story. Some parts aren't pleasant, but most crimes and their aftermath aren't pleasant. MacDonald did not create a main protagonist who the reader could follow page by page. I think it was an experiment by MacDonald, but it works and the reader will be satisfied with the ending.

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## **Ed says**

I remain a big fan of JDM's pulp fiction titles published before he began writing his Travis McGee books. The Neon Jungle (Random House reissued it in 2014 which is the version I read) is his 1950s juvenile delinquents novel. I love the way he draws his characters. He also uses a Mike Hammer reference with one of the characters. Great stuff.

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## **Steven says**

I'm going against the grain with this one. Not because the writing isn't strong - it is, with some of MacDonald's most penetrating character and cultural analysis - but because the narrative strategy made it so I never really "bought in."

The point of view is omniscient, but not really wide ranging. The novel begins with a detached several page description of "the neighborhood" as a prologue. Then for the next several chapters each is zoomed in on one focal character. So just when you think the story is about Bonny, we leave her and shift to a chapter about Paul, and then Walter, and then to Teena, and Jana and Vern, and on it goes. Then we circle back around to some of them but not all. Finally, as the novel nears the climax we have a chapter where we rapidly shift amongst the characters in more typical omniscient fashion and that works to lock in the narrative with a propulsive energy. The main defect, though, is that there's never a sense of whose novel this is, never a sense of who we are supposed to be rooting for and who we are supposed to be rooting against.

Great writing at the micro level but it never engaged me at the macro level. One of my lease favorite MacDonald novels.

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## **Kelcan says**

was what it was

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## **Pamela says**

I'm going against the grain to say that I prefer MacDonald's stand alones over the Travis McGees. This book is one of the reasons why.

McGee is a superficially complex character. He seemingly goes through changes during the book but at the end, reverts to the same character he was at the beginning--as all serial characters should.

The characters in this, and his other stand alone books are complex to the core. Yes, there are issues and attitudes that were considered normal back then but are not now--most especially violence against women. But readers need to keep in mind that times were what they were and more importantly, MacDonald is writing noir...that's NOIR with a capital N-O-I-R. If you want sweetness and light, go someplace else. If you want deep-down dark and gritty--you've come to the right place.

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## **Ed says**

This 1953 novel came at the beginning of John D. MacDonald's novel writing career. His first novel, The Brass Cupcake (1950), was only three years earlier. The novel is dated by the reference to the Korean War and is draggy at times but ultimately rewarding.

Henry Varaki rescues Bonny from a back alley beating, nurses her back to health, marries her and sends her home to his family before going off to be killed in Korea. At the Varaki family market business, Bonny helps out but is unresponsive and spends her time in self pity until shocked out of it by parole officer Paul Darmond. Newly alert, Bonny realizes that Henry's older brother Walter is stealing from the till and delivery man Vern is sleeping with father-in-law Gus' young wife. Plot lines combine in an explosive finale.

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## **James Thane says**

This is an early stand-alone from John D. MacDonald, a writer best known for his series featuring Travis McGee. MacDonald was a prolific writer, but he was also very widely read and often incorporated social and economic themes into his books as he does here.

The book, which was first published in 1953, is set in a declining industrial city somewhere in the Midwest. At the center of the story is the family that runs the Varaki Quality Market. The patriarch, Gus Varaki, once ruled the family and the business with a strong but benevolent hand, bringing into the business and the family outsiders who had fallen on hard times and who needed a helping hand. In particular, Gus has a close relationship with Paul Darmond, the local parole officer, and Gus has offered jobs and a home to two parolees that Darmond has recommended.

But the family has fallen on hard times, emotionally if not financially. Gus's wife dies and that places a huge emotional strain on him. He later marries again, this time to a much younger woman, and his spirits are briefly revived. But then his middle child, Henry, is killed in the Korean war, and the loss saps Gus of his energy and attention.

In consequence, both the family and the business begin to drift. Gus's other son, Walter, is deeply dissatisfied with his wife and with his life in general and takes advantage of his father's distraction. Gus's only other child, a daughter named Teena, falls in with the wrong crowd and soon has serious problems of her own.

Now joining the family is another troubled young woman named Bonnie, whom Henry had married in California before leaving for Korea. Bonnie sees how things are dissolving around the family, but the question is can she do anything to stem the tide of trouble. More important, does she even care enough to want to?

MacDonald teases out of all of these relationships a compelling story that touches on themes that were particularly relevant in the early 1950s, like juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, social and economic decay, and the place of family in the larger society. The criminal activities that occur in the book are of somewhat lesser importance than these larger issues, and at the heart of the novel is its central question: Are some people simply born bad and beyond redemption, or can people who might once have made a mistake truly change, reform their lives and become productive members of society?

*The Neon Jungle* is a fascinating and entertaining read and it is one of a number of MacDonald's novels that have now been republished in great new trade paperback editions by Random House. This is very welcome news for long-time fans of MacDonald's who will now be able to fill out their collections, and it's also an opportunity for people unacquainted with MacDonald's work to be introduced to one of the masters of crime fiction in the second half of the Twentieth century.

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## **Michael Fredette says**

John D. MacDonald who is best known for the Travis McGee series of mysteries, also wrote many fine stand-alone novels, typically published as paperback originals during the post-WWII era, the most popular of which is *The Executioners*, adapted twice for film as *Cape Fear*. After decades of being out of print, Random House is finally issuing these titles in trade paperback. *The Neon Jungle* (1953) is a naturalistic portrait of an unnamed American city, featuring an ensemble cast of characters. The focus is on the Varaki supermarket run by Gus Varaki a generous and compassionate (though overly trusting) man who is willing to give parolees a second chance by offering them a job and lodging. When his son Henry is killed in the Korean War, the family is thrown into turmoil. Gus neglects his young wife Jana. His daughter Teena falls in with a fast crowd who introduces her first to marijuana, then to skin popping heroin (!) His son Walter (disgruntled by his thwarted ambitions, discontented working in the family business and unhappy with his nagging wife) has begun to extort money from the supermarket as part of a plan to abandon his pregnant wife Doris. An employee, an ex-con named Vern, is using the supermarket delivery service as a front to distribute narcotics. All these elements converge in a violent and explosive climax with Gus being manipulated into an act of murder by Vern, whose villainy approaches Iago-like proportions.

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## **Peter Sidell says**

### **Where the strong and the lucky survive**

MacDonald had been called a Calvinist. He certainly preaches the old time religion in this story. It becomes the salvation from the law of the jungle. The predators get their comeuppance.

The characters are well drawn. It did take me a while to get them straight in my mind.  
The Korean war death at the beginning underlines the role of luck and chance.

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