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Surpassing Mere Entertainment: Interview with Davis MacDonald

By Carin Chea

Davis MacDonald is a man of mystery. Literally. A full-time practicing lawyer, MacDonald is also a successful novelist who has penned eight mystery thrillers, all drawing upon his real-life experiences in the legal field.

But, never one to squander an opportunity, the author manages to incorporate a prominent social or environmental justice issue into each and every one of his story lines.

Couched between witty characters and rousing plot twists, only a literary magician would be able to seamlessly inject a message of social justice into a mystery novel riveting enough to be your start-of-the-summer blockbuster.

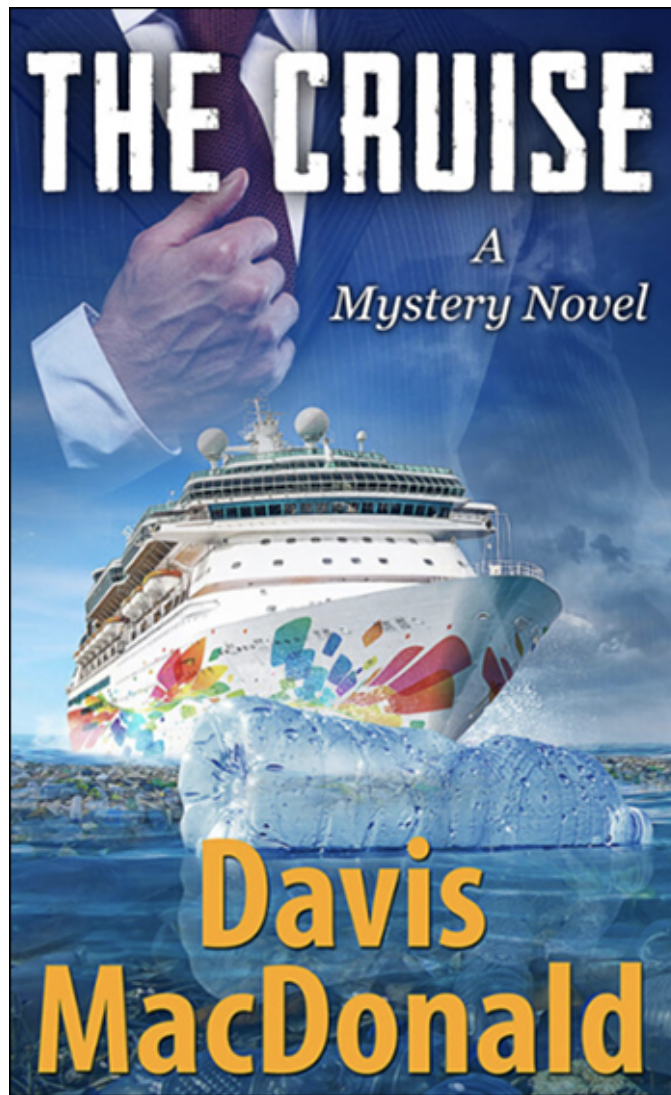
But, entertainment was never the only goal this prolific writer had in mind when he began his career as a novelist. From the outset, MacDonald has always used his intelligence and influence for the greater good. And, during unspeakably difficult times like these, what a welcome relief it is knowing people like Davis MacDonald exist.

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You're an attorney, investment banker, law professor, and novelist. Which of those came first?

I've been an attorney for 40 years, and there's a lot of writing involved in being an attorney.

How did you become a novelist, though?

I read an article in the LA Times. I came across an interview of one of the best novelists in the country. He said, "I don't use outlines. I use the Faulkner method. I have a strong idea, strong characters. And when the characters tell me what do to, I write."

I pick a critical or social issue, and I bury that in the middle of the story so you have a thrilling story to read. Inside that story is information about an important, serious issue. The book I just came out with, *The Cruise*, deals with what may be our next pandemic. We're not even through with this one, but a worse one may be on the way.

What's *The Cruise* about?

The Cruise is about a ship and the people on the ship. A storm in the Pacific takes the ship off into the Great

Pacific Garbage Patch, which is twice the size of Texas and made of plastic. The plastic drops to the floor of the ocean and the fish eat that and the birds eat the fish. So, if you have that lovely piece of salmon for dinner, you're likely ingesting plastic.

They estimate that we consume about 5 grams of plastic a week as humans. That's about the size of your credit card. Over the course of the year, we consume about 74,000 micrograms of plastic. We don't have the studies to determine what that's doing to us, but we certainly have the autopsies to show us that it's real.

What inspired you to write The Cruise?

The Cruise is a fun read. It gives people the suspense and thrills of an exciting mystery novel with a puzzle to figure out. But it also gives me a chance to write about a real issue.

Also, I'm a sailor and I love the ocean.

Tell us about your other works. I understand you have 7 other novels?

The Lake (the book I wrote before The Cruise) predicted this pandemic we're in the middle of right now. I just had no idea we were going to be in a pandemic 5 months later when I published it.

The starts with the sale of body parts and pig valves. The business of this lab in Lake Arrowhead was to be a broker for body parts, which happens illegal all over the world. People actually go on body-part holidays: They disappear for a while and get a new kidney.

At the same time, the Swine Flu is sweeping through Asia and parts of Europe, transmitted from pig to pig. I posed this scenario in Lake Arrowhead, where The Lake takes place.

In this story, scientists were breeding pigs originally for replacement heart valves for humans. It's a big business: If you need heart surgery and you have a bad valve, they're either going to put a mechanical valve or a pig valve in there. Pigs are currently (and have been for many years) grown to provide heart valves.

So, in this story, these scientists decide to insert human DNA into the chain of their pigs. They are developing designer pigs with DNA matching human DNA. But when the Swine Flu sweeps into the pigs it easily jumps over the Human DNA in the pig's makeup, creating a bridge into a deadly human swine flu. Presto. You have a human pandemic.

The book is fun and is a puzzle. It's a quick read, but along the way, you learn about the Swine Flu and the risks of tinkering with human DNA.

You have the same protagonist in all your books. Tell us about him.

Yes, The Judge. The first 2 books are love stories where he finds his partner. In the remaining 5 books, his wife comes into the story and they work the puzzles out together.

The first book was based a lot on my experiences in life, but as you write these books, your protagonist become his own character. He's funny and smart at solving these mysteries I write for him.



Of all the genres, how did you come to become a classic mystery writer?

I've read a lot of mystery stories. I think people enjoy them. I write to tell people things they need to know. The question is: How am I going to get people to read this, right? If I write a scientific paper, they're not going to read it. It's got to be something you read when waiting in line, or on the beach during your vacation.

My readers come away pleased having read my book, but a lot of what I write about (the sale of body parts, the engineering of heart valves, plastic ingestion) it all sticks with you. It entertains you, but it also leaves you with knowledge about an important issue.

Tell us about your latest book.

I started a new book called Vegas and I'm still thinking about what issue to tackle. The characters are still arguing about which topic we should address.

We've covered some interesting things in my other books. In The Island, there is a small town with people who couldn't get along. But, when a catastrophe comes along and threatens to destroy the town, the residents have to band together for the greater good. As people,

we do that: We come together to save the village. And it's based on a true story.

There was a fire that came over the ridge and almost burned Avalon on Catalina Island to the ground. I write about things that I've seen or heard or experienced.

Like Vegas, for example. It opens with a man crawling across the desert with turkey vultures circling overhead, waiting expectantly. He ends up dying because he fell out of favor with certain people. They could have shot him. But instead they merely dropped him off, not a hair on his head touched, 30 miles from any road. That really happened.

In Silicon Beach, I talk about the homeless. 'The homeless' is a conglomerate idea. But, they are really many people, with many stories. They are the soldier with PTSD; the people who've gone through a divorce; the people who've lost their jobs, the people who are addicted, the people who are injured, the people who have difficulties in working or dealing with society and all its rules; the people who have handicap IQ's, and so on.

I get heavily into who the homeless are, why they don't have any political power, and even suggest a solution to give them political clout.

Out of all your novels, is there one that particularly stands out more to you than the others?

That's like asking me to pick a favorite child among my seven kids. They're all interesting and all wonderful.

But, as to my books, I love The Strand. It's the story of a fictional city between Hermosa Beach and Manhattan Beach that has a pre-school called The Strand. The preschool's owners are accused of sexually molesting the pre-school children. That may sound familiar if you think back to the McMartin Preschool Case of the 1980s.

The press jumps on the case in my book with a yellow journalism attitude and convicts the owners in the press before there is ever a trial. The psychologist who interviews the pre-school children in preparation for the district attorney's case, asks leading questions and used dolls and other manipulations to suggest to the children the story he wants to hear; that they were molested.

So, the evidence purported to be given by the children, the only persons who experienced what happened, if anything, is tainted. It's a parable of what can go wrong in our judicial system.

In The Cruise, for instance, the first chapter opens with a prologue where a young man comes home at 2 a.m., wakes his dad up, and coaxes him out into the driveway. The son goes across the driveway and picks up a Folger's coffee can and starts yelling at his dad for

the dad's focus on money and neglect of the emotional needs of the family. The dad gets upset and starts lecturing him back.

The son says, "I thought you'd say something like that," then dumps gasoline over his head from the Folger's can, and lights himself on fire. Something similar actually happened. The cruise six months later finds people mysteriously dying on a trip to Hawaii, out across the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, with the last death died to that suicide at the beginning of the book.

I look for real stories in my life and that's what I use as a basis for my fiction. But I try to inject humor into my stories as well, to lighten up the mysteries and the more serious topics buried within.

Do You have a very unique writing process?

Before my final edit on each book, I read a single story again and again from one of my favorite authors, always the same story. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Then I go back and chop sentences and refine language to make resounding points in clear, clean prose.

My work might be summed up the poet Slanislav Lec, who said, "I give you bitter pills in sugar coating. The pills are harmless: the poison is in the sugar."

I hope people read these books because I want them to know about the prominent issues uncovered. That's why I write.

But the books are fun, exciting, suspenseful puzzles, easy to reads and designed to entertain. People tell me they read the books on the beach, on airplanes, on trains, standing in line and often past their bedtimes at night.

If your novels were turned into a limited TV series, who would play *The Judge*?

The Judge is an intelligent, humorous, sometimes opinionated, sometimes curmudgeon type of guy, who often finds himself out of step with the so rapidly changing 21st Century World we live in. Don't we all. Maybe a Liam Neeson, or someone of that type.

For more information on Davis (not David, by the way, and its old MACdonald), please visit DavisMacDonald-author.com.

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