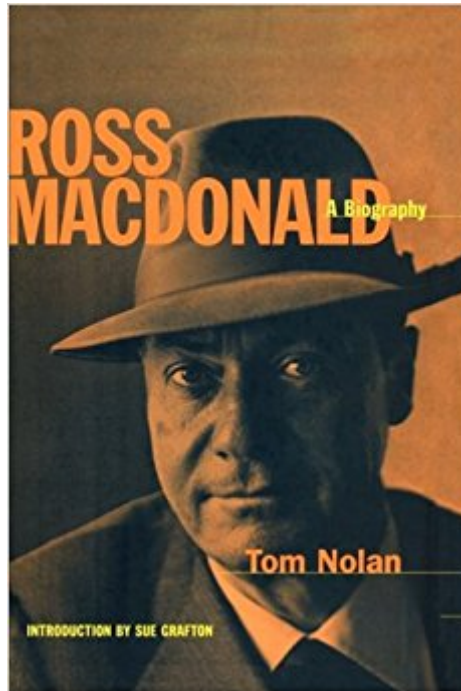


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Ross MacDonald : A Biography



Synopsis

When he died in 1983, Ross Macdonald was the best-known and most highly regarded crime-fiction writer in America. Long considered the rightful successor to the mantles of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald and his Lew Archer-novels were hailed by *The New York Times* as "the finest series of detective novels ever written by an American." Now, in the first full-length biography of this extraordinary and influential writer, a much fuller picture emerges of a man to whom hiding things came as second nature. While it was no secret that Ross Macdonald was the pseudonym of Kenneth Millar -- a Santa Barbara man married to another good mystery writer, Margaret Millar -- his official biography was sparse. Drawing on unrestricted access to the Kenneth and Margaret Millar Archives, on more than forty years of correspondence, and on hundreds of interviews with those who knew Millar well, author Tom Nolan has done a masterful job of filling in the blanks between the psychologically complex novels and the author's life -- both secret and overt. Ross Macdonald came to crime-writing honestly. Born in northern California to Canadian parents, Kenneth Millar grew up in Ontario virtually fatherless, poor, and with a mother whose mental stability was very much in question. From the age of twelve, young Millar was fighting, stealing, and breaking social and moral laws; by his own admission, he barely escaped being a criminal. Years later, Millar would come to see himself in his tales' wrongdoers. "I don't have to be violent," he said, "My books are." How this troubled young man came to be one of the most brilliant graduate students in the history of the University of Michigan and how this writer, who excelled in a genre all too often looked down upon by literary critics, came to have a lifelong friendship with Eudora Welty are all examined in the pages of Tom Nolan's meticulous biography. We come to a sympathetic understanding of the Millars' long, and sometimes rancorous, marriage and of their life in Santa Barbara, California, with their only daughter, Linda, whose legal and emotional traumas lie at the very heart of the story. But we also follow the trajectory of a literary career that began in the pages of *Manhunt* and ended with the great respect of such fellow writers as Marshall McLuhan, Hugh Kenner, Nelson Algren, and Reynolds Price, and the longtime distinguished publisher Alfred A. Knopf. As *Ross Macdonald: A Biography* makes abundantly clear, Ross Macdonald's greatest character -- above and beyond his famous Lew Archer -- was none other than his creator, Kenneth Millar.

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Customer Reviews

More caring than Chandler, more productive than Hammett, Ross Macdonald was arguably America's best crime novelist, and Tom Nolan--who has been working on this large and impressive biography since its subject's death in 1983--makes that argument eloquently. With great energy and considerable art, he captures the essence of a remarkable man, born Kenneth Millar, as his life moved from a bleak, tormented childhood in the wilds of Canada, through an uncertain love-hate relationship with the world of academia, and then to early struggles, growing success, and family tragedy on the golden shores of California. Along the way, Nolan charts one of the most unusual literary marriages in recent memory, to fellow mystery writer Margaret Millar--a working relationship so carefully protected and circumscribed that it probably did irrevocable damage to their only child. The author also enlivens the usually dreary details of a writer's financial life with shafts of brilliant insight, especially into the strange relationship between Macdonald and his lifelong publisher, Alfred Knopf, who Margaret aptly describes as "a troubled and a troubling man." But perhaps Nolan's most impressive achievement is in showing exactly how and why the murder mystery became a worthy medium for some of the world's smartest people who read and write in the form. This book will make you seek out the best of Ross Macdonald, available in quality paperback editions: *The Chill*, *The Far Side of the Dollar*, *The Wycherly Woman*, *Black Money*, *The Drowning Pool*, *The Moving Target*, *The Underground Man*, and *The Galton Case*. --Dick Adler

All aficionados of the mystery genre know the work of Ross Macdonald (the pseudonym of Kenneth Millar), whom Nolan calls the "philosopher king of detective novelists," the author of 18 Lew Archer novels and heir to Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Now, this first full biography reveals, deeply and affectionately, the man behind the fiction. Millar started writing thrillers for the money but

wound up irrevocably changing the detective novel, making it both more socially conscious and psychologically probing and bringing mysteries onto the bestseller list along the way. Nolan's elegant, moving account neither sensationalizes nor glosses over the unpleasant events of Millar's life: his sexual experiences at a very young age; his daughter's brief, troubled life; his heartbreaking decline and death from Alzheimer's disease. As a youth, Millar used books to escape his hardscrabble Canadian youth and his emotionally disturbed mother (who almost abandoned him to an orphanage). Some of his early favorites were Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and the novels of Dashiell Hammett, whom he felt "told the truth about how the world worked." As an adult, perhaps because he had looked for mentors to replace his own absent father, Millar was "surrogate father to probably hundreds of people." Many, like singer-songwriter Warren Zevon (who struggled with liquor and drugs) worshipped him. Zevon tells of the day he "went to the door, and there was Lew Archer, come to save my life." Millar's relationship with his wife of 46 years, Margaret Millar (herself a bestselling mystery writer) was more complex: they were at once competitive and supportive of each other's work. Perhaps the best description of this biography—with its loves and betrayals, professional successes and personal tragedies—is that it reads like a Ross Macdonald novel, which is high praise, indeed. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This is a thoughtful, literate and very entertaining biography of one of the 20th century's most elusive and fascinating writers. Mr. Nolan approaches his talented but tormented subject with great empathy and insight, while providing a sharp picture of the mid-century literary scene; of the hot-house of wealth, waste and seductive pleasure that was Santa Barbara in those years; and of all writers' love-hate co-dependency with Hollywood. The sections of MacDonald's warm relationship with Eudora Welty are especially rewarding - and surprising. A fine book. B. Paul

A good biography defines for the reader the complete subject. An exceptional biography not only defines the subject but offers insights and generates feeling for the subject. Nolan has done a truly masterful job of offering us Kenneth Millar, without ever once inflicting any kind of authorial (hence subjective) opinions on the material. As someone who, to this day, can remember many of Millar/Macdonald's exquisitely crafted lines and scenes, and who loved both his work and that of his wife Margaret Millar, it was a wonderful experience to read this book. Since they were so integral to each other's lives, author Nolan has wisely, and quite fully, included Margaret in this biography in order to give us a full perspective on their life together--a pair of (ultimately) enormously successful writers who happened to be married. Margaret comes across as a clever, difficult, quite damaged

woman, often hiding behind throwaway quips and quite caustic remarks; not at all sociable, undeniably gifted, and possessed of a humor that was frequently cruel. Millar, on the other hand, is shown to be, first and foremost, a generous, thoughtful, kind, and immensely gifted man with a fine, fine mind. His long struggle to achieve the success he so richly deserved is, in some ways, very contemporary; in other ways, it's reflective of the times (the late 40s through the late 70s). Rich, too, in physical detail, what I particularly liked was Nolan's comprehension of Millar's sense of being an alien in America. Despite his American birth, having grown up in Canada, Millar brought to his life and to his work a kind of interior chill that is so very much a part of Canadian life. A very tricky thing to describe, yet Nolan does a masterful job of highlighting the difference in sensibilities between Canadians and Americans. It's no small achievement. We Canadians are not Americans, but articulating why--and defining the cultural niceties--can be exceedingly difficult. To learn that a mind as fine as Millar's is destroyed, ultimately, by Alzheimer's is achingly painful to read. To "see" the man begin to falter and then fail is harrowing and, finally, heartbreaking. Millar redefined the mystery genre, bringing it forward into the mainstream of literature with consummate skill and a peerless talent. Nolan does his subject proud. This is a book that would, undoubtedly, have pleased the shy and unpretentious Millar enormously. Read every Ross Macdonald book you can find. And then read this splendid biography. My highest recommendation.

Mr. Nolan has done a meticulous job here. Quite a bio. You get the idea Ross Macdonald was as hard-working and decent as they come. It'll make you wish you had known the man. Tom Nolan's book gets high marks here!

A++++

An excellent biography of an excellent writer. Read it twice, many years apart. Each time, after finishing, had to go back and re-read several of the guy's novels. Most of them hold up well. I especially love RM's take on things California.

Single best book on any hardboiled writer. A mystery thriller in its own right.

It is very detailed, very interesting. Kenneth Millar is not an easy personality to write about, but Nolan manages to hold your interest. I would have preferred an even deeper analysis of the books themselves, but I can see why he did not do this.

excellent copy. no fringe marks, or underlining on the pages. a crisp copy with firm spine.

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