

ROSS MACDONALD: A Life

Ross Macdonald, the subject of Tom Nolan's new biography, lived in Santa Barbara for more than half his life, a four-decade sojourn that was characterized by opposing forces – reticence and assertiveness.

In the early 1970s, after an exchange of letters, I was selling books by mail order from San Francisco to Santa Barbara's Kenneth Millar. At the same time, as a moonlighting book reviewer for whom the added income was not unwelcome, I was commenting on the novels he wrote under the nom de plume, Ross Macdonald. Ken was not a collector, but a reader. It was text he was after. From our catalogues he was selecting the early titles of, among others, Joyce Carol Oates and John Updike. During a troubled boyhood that found the confused teenager hovering between juvenile delinquency and social responsibility, it was the reading of books that inspired Ken to live a responsible moral life.

After we moved down to Santa Barbara in 1975, Ken and I often lunched. He guided me to the no-frills establishments he preferred via the untravelled, loosely connected back alleys that paralleled State Street. Because of a predisposition toward skin cancer, he wished to avoid the noon glare, Ken explained. It was clear, though, that this most private of men who had absolutely no small talk was not exactly anxious to chance upon acquaintances in his peregrinations.

On the other hand, he took obvious pleasure in telling me of the time he had walked downtown in the company of a prominent city planner from Greece who was taken by the similarities between Santa Barbara and Periclean Athens – the site of Greece's Golden Age. Here, as well as there, the mountains dipped down gently toward the sea. The two climates were equally temperate, the populations roughly the same, and one could walk to any place of civic importance in a few minutes. This comparison appealed to Ken for whom history was the connective tissue that linked generations to each other.

Canadian-bred Kenneth Millar showed up in Santa Barbara by way of Michigan, right after World War II. From his earliest days here he felt integrally connected to the community. Ken was the dynamic force behind a changing group of us who attended writers' lunches started back in the 1950s. The word "writer" was a permissive coinage as newspapermen, publishers, and just plain book people were welcome at the bi-weekly gatherings. (Woman

were tolerated in those unenlightened days, but not encouraged to attend.) On the evening before a scheduled lunch, it was Ken, a man for whom the telephone was not a preferred mode of communication, who would place some 15 or 20 calls to remind us of the date.

Those lunches were, I am certain, a major part of Ken's social life. By the time we had come to town, the Millars were virtual stay-at-homes. Ken spent most of his evenings at home, corresponding with less established writers. He encouraged their efforts and edited their manuscripts. I know of at least two unsung instances in which books he had thoroughly edited might more accurately have been described as collaborations.

Readers of the Lew Archer novels might guess that their creator was a political liberal and cultural conservative. During the Cold War, when the epithet "bleeding hearts" still awaited coinage, Ken wore his liberal views like a hairshirt. Detente was not an option for one who saw political issues in terms of black and white only. There were breaks with longstanding friends whose views he had come to disapprove of.

That kind of activism served Ken better in less controversial areas. He and his wife, Margaret, were charter members of the local Audubon chapter. In her excellent book on bird watching in Santa Barbara, "The Birds and Beasts Were There," she describes Ken swimming a full half mile out into the Pacific to identify a rare specimen.

Margaret, or Maggie as her friends knew her, was herself a formidable being, having been established as a successful author of detective novels before her husband was published. The Millars' marital relationship was characterized by internal tensions. She was outgoing in social situations but resented it when Ken invited people to their home. He was introverted yet sought out people with whom he could connect on intellectually intimate levels. He was also a brooder who sifted through his thoughts carefully before speaking, whereas she would blurt out whatever came to mind. It occurred to me that she had been born without a superego. Most tellingly, they even pronounced their surname differently. Ken accented the first syllable, she stressed the latter.

Despite such differences they shared affinities. Each championed the other's work. Ken created the titles for Maggie's books and edited her manuscripts. Both were environmentalists who picketed during the 1969 oil spill here. Ken helped structure

the pivotal Santa Barbara Declaration of Environmental Rights that issued from UCSB, and fostered the formation of several nonprofit environmental groups with other socially responsible Santa Barbarans like Robert Easton. In writing the foreword for Easton's book about the oil spill, "Black Tide," Ken likened Bob to "those ancient Greek historians who fought in the wars they later chronicled ... he is a witness as well as a recorder." Another classical allusion by one for whom the importance of history (which, after all, is human experience shared over time) was paramount.

Kenneth Millar's deeply felt commitment to the city he loved eventually found its way into Ross Macdonald's books. The later novels were thematically organized around actual Santa Barbara disasters. The push and pull of man's relationship with nature absorbed him. The narrative thread of "The Underground Man" (1971) was patterned on the Coyote Fire that threatened the city in 1964. In "Sleeping Beauty" (1973), a fictional oil spill evoked Santa Barbara's recently blackened seashore.

The separate personas of Kenneth Millar the man, Ross Macdonald the author, and Lew Archer, his fictional alter ego, comprise a telling three-dimensional portrait. Ken's roiled youth is reflected in the many portraits of confused young men who crop up in the Archer novels, just as representations of the Millars' daughter, who had her own personal crises, turn up repeatedly in the books.

Many Santa Barbara literary figures were influenced by Ken. Sue Grafton, herself a nationally known author, continues to use Santa Barbara as the background for her Kinsey Millhone detective novels – employing the same fictional place name (Santa Teresa) that Ross Macdonald created for the Archer books. "Even now, in idle moments, I return to his writing, not only for the inspiration he provides, but for the quiet pleasure of his prose," she has written.

Ken's closest friend was Donald Pearce, who followed the Millars to Santa Barbara and is now a retired professor of English literature from UCSB. Don's accounts of their time together in college and graduate school form the backbone of Tom Nolan's biography of Ross Macdonald. Going back more than 60 years, Don still remembers long conversations between himself and Ken in precise and telling detail – the recollective equivalent, really, of perfect pitch in music. This testimony, together with those of dozens others Tom Nolan interviewed, has fleshed out an

integrated portrait of a model citizen of Santa Barbara.

An early meeting with Ken sticks out in my own mind. We were still living in Northern California, and I had brought my wife and two-year-old daughter to Santa Barbara. We walked the beach with Ken, whose conversation was spare as usual. Later, back home, we received a letter from him.

“The three of you,” he said, “made me feel again that we are making a civilization here in California which will leave beauties like long shadows after it, and wish that I had my life to live over again in those later times.”

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