



## Head Games

*Craig McDonald*

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## **Head Games** Craig McDonald

A wistful ballad of lost America rooted in borderland history and mythology. Hector Lassiter has Pancho Villa's long lost skull. He's also got people on his trail. Competing fraternities, Mexican bandits, and US Secret Service are after him. But Lassiter is larger than life. He bedded Dietrich and boxed Hemingway, this can't be too bad. Can it?

## **Head Games Details**

Date : Published September 1st 2007 by Bleak House Books

ISBN : 9781932557428

Author : Craig McDonald

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## From Reader Review Head Games for online ebook

### Jodi says

This book is nominated for an Anthony Award for best first novel. It starts out a bit weird. I'm only 30 pages in. It has some pretty stiff competition with the Sakey and Chercov books. This is one of the oddest books I've read. It just didn't call to me. The main character is a pulp fiction writer in 1957, I believe, who comes into possession of the head of Pancho Villa, and people are trying to take it from him. There are appearances by real people of the time, Orson Wells and Marlene Dietrich, and talk of Hemmingway, and at the end none other than George W. Bush. I did find that part a bit humorous. Still, it wasn't the style of book I enjoy. Just not to my taste. Granted, it is nominated for an Anthony Award for best first novel, so obviously it appeals to many!

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### Alex says

You start a book like *Head Games*, set as it is in the fifties, and you wonder if it has to go so hard on period details like casual homophobia, and so often at that. The first novel written in Craig McDonald's Hector Lassiter series, although the seventh chronologically, starts well. People die indiscriminately, life is cheap, and women are accommodating without being doormats ... but then we get that little sting of poison.

The argument goes that homophobia was period accurate, but so was sexism and racism, and Lassiter is actually fairly enlightened on both of those counts. It wouldn't kill him, or McDonald, to *not* be like this - but that's what we've got ... and, fortunately, we can *sort of* get over it.

Because the thing is *Head Games* is ultimately a rollicking caper with a hardboiled protagonist in the form of hard drinking pulp novelist, screenwriter, and name dropper extraordinaire Hector Lassiter. Possibly McDonald wasn't planning a series at the time, or he might not have gone so hard on cramming Welles, Dietrich, and Hemingway in so soon, or set the novel so close to the end of Lassiter's life, but that's just the way it is.

*Head Games* is the sort of novel that you pick up for its name and concept combo: Lassiter goes on the road with a journalist and an actress with the purported skull of Pancho Villa, trying to protect it from falling into the hands of various fraternity members, treasure hunters, and the Bush family (*that* Bush family). Apart from the glaring flaw in Lassiter's character, he's a good lead and he carries the novel well. Some versions are paired with the short story in which he was introduced, which dovetails with the conclusion of the novel itself - the light contradictions that don't jive with Lassiter character make one question its canonicity, but it's helpful to have to hand.

McDonald wrote himself into several corners with *Head Games*, so one may want to forgive him for any retcons that have to be made along the way. There is a degree of forgiveness that you have to engage in to be able to stomach *Head Games* in its entirety, but if you can get past that sticking point it goes down very easily indeed.

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## **Karl says**

This is number 150 of 250 signed and numbered copies signed and dated by Craig McDonald.

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## **John McKenna says**

### **Mysterious Book Report No. 51**

#### **John Dwaine McKenna**

Memorial day weekend is by tradition the start of summer, and the beginning of vacation season. It's when we look forward to ice cream, baseball and garage sales . . . as well as "lazy hazy days," halter tops, short shorts, sandals and flowers blooming for three months or more. A lot of us think it's the best time of the year . . . when we hop in the car and go places to see things. And that's why I'm kicking off the summer reading season with one of the most kick-ass road trip novels I've read since Jack Kerouac.

The novel is Head Games by Craig McDonald.

It was nominated for an Edgar in 2008, for Best First Novel, (more about the Edgar's in next weeks MBR) and is "Equal parts road novel, crime caper and historical fiction; a black comedy and wistful ballad of lost America rooted in borderland myth and history." That quote from the liner notes. Book one is subtitled, 1957: The Land of Hope and Dreams, and the first sentence reads : "We were sitting in a backroom of a cantina on the outskirts of Ciudad Juarez, three drinks in, when Bill Wade reached into the dusty duffel bag he had tucked under the table and plunked down the Mexican generals head."

The head is that of Doroteo Arango; known to all the world as Generalissimo Francisco "Pancho" Villa, the charismatic leader of the peasant army who nearly won the Mexican Civil War in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Yeah, that guy . . . Pancho Villa. A huge bounty is being offered for the head by Prescott Bush, the director of the CIA, a member of the infamous, and secret, Skull and Bones society at Yale University, the father of George Herbert Walker Bush, and grandfather of George W. Bush. Yeah. Those Bush's. That plan is opposed by about ten-thousand Mexican criminals, drug loads and their murderous, crazy, armed-to-the-teeth thugs, all of whom are bent on keeping the icon in Mexico. Within a few pages of the first sentence, an all-out machine-gun and pistol fight takes place that leaves almost all the participants dead, and the narrator/protagonist Hector Lassiter fleeing for his life, running for the border in his '57 Chevy Belaire, with two carloads of unidentified hostiles in close pursuit. The chase, and the gun battles, run from Texas, to California, to New Haven Connecticut and back to Texas as everyone tries to get the head. This one will leave you on the edge of your seat gasping for air and calling for more while laughing your butt off. It's fast and furious and fun in equal measures.

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## **Vickie says**

WOW! Definitely not for the faint of heart by any stretch of the imagination. Takes place in the late '50's, Lassiter writes pulp fiction and is in the middle of being interviewed for a magazine when the beginning of all hell breaking loose happens.

Everything spirals from there. Gritty, grim, bleak, adventure, blood, severed heads.....McDonald weaves actual personalities into the story: Orson Welles, Marlene Dietrich, Ernest Hemingway, Prescott Bush [that Bush family] sprinkled throughout. Hollywood reigns, with the head of Pancho Villa at the center.

Rough listening, but an excellent story.  
Definitely recommend.

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### **Johnny says**

Pure pulp. Fun, but ultimately so pulpy that it often borders on the ridiculous. So when it attempts to capture actual human emotion, it is hard to take it seriously.

One of my main problems with a lot of the new "pulp" and neo-noir books is that they are trying to be "pulp" and it shows. Most of the pulp writers of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were not trying to write pulp, they were writing to the limits of their talent within a genre. Often producing great books, more often not.

It's almost as if the modern writers are slumming and purposely dumbing down their books, rather than trying for more. As if "pulp" is an excuse for writing without depth. For all the pastiche and homage, are they adding anything to the genre beyond more harsh language and more graphic violence?

This is not an indictment of HEAD GAMES, which really is a fun read. However with its era and reference to real historical figures (Orson Welles, Prescott Bush, and many more), it sometimes comes off as pulp James Ellroy-light (who is pretty pulpy himself).

HEAD GAMES hits the ground running and the first half is breakneck, but somewhere in the middle it slows down and tries to be a character piece, ending with what feels like a 70-page epilogue.

For all my nitpicking above, this is a strong first novel. I have another novel by McDonald on my shelf and I'm very much looking forward to reading his two books of interviews with crime writers.

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### **Paul McNamee says**

Hector Lassiter is a pulp crime writer, a novelist and a screenwriter (who tends to get more anonymous "script doctor" duty than screen credit.) He lives the pulp life - too many cigarettes, too much booze, too many women and Mexican whores. And he gets embroiled in capers and crimes. This time, he's caught up in a shell game of skulls - one of which was on the shoulders of Pancho Villa. The skull is worth money, if delivery can be made running the gauntlet of FBI, CIA, Skull & Bones society frat boys and Mexican bandits. Beyond that, the skull might be the key to a lost treasure hoard of the Mexican Revolution, putting desperate, violent men on Lassiter's tail.

Lassiter is a fictional construct who McDonald weaves through real history and personalities. Old Mexican Revolutionaries, old mercenaries, Hollywood greats. Lassiter has a very real, gruff voice. This novel just zips along. The veracity balances the outlandish every step of the way.

Noir. Road trip. Crime caper. Black comedy. Western.

It's all that and more. The whole definitely exceeds the sum of its parts.

I will be reading more entries from the Hector Lassiter series.

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## **Barb Radmore says**

Head, head, who's got the head?

Ok, it really is a book about people chasing other people who may or may not have Pancho Villa's head. It really is, no kidding. And with that absurd premise Craig McDonald has written a book that actually works as a boisterous, thrill filled action adventure that is a blast to read.

The legend of Villa's head being stolen by Harvard's Skull and Bones Society has been documented throughout the years. It was brought up during the Presidential campaign because rumor had it that Preston Bush- yup, of those Bushes- was involved at the time. McDonald uses these myths to form the basis for the aptly titled Head Games. He creates a hard boiled crime writer, his newbie interviewer, a beautiful Mexican girl and throws them into the middle of the fight for possession of Villa's decapitated head (now a skull.) It is filled with car chases, lots of blood and a little love.

Head Games is a novel with a strong plot, characters who are characters and plenty of action. Lines like "But talking about your plans is the surest way to make God laugh " prove McDonald's writing prowess. This also shows one of the book's strengths- it sense of humor. McDonald never takes his characters seriously, he lets them run amok with just enough leash on them to prevent them from getting totally out of hand. His crime writer, Lassiter, hangs out with the big wigs of the 1950s- Hemingway, Dietrich and Welles are all brought into the scene. The plot thread that has Lassiter not speaking to Hemingway over a past argument adds a fun touch of fictitious realism. The pile of bodies grows, the number of enemies is ever increasing and the chase seems never ending. And characters from history traipse through the pages, recapturing their forgotten place in our little remembered past.

The other surprising strength of the book is its ending, Book 2. It has its end of the adventure, culminating climax that is expected. But the continuation of the story through the years to the book's and the story's actual ending is a charming twist. It adds pathos and emotion to the over all appeal and depth to the book. Unexpected yet appreciated.

Bleak House has again found an author and his book that is just off the norm into the creative and diverse. Head Games is a serous bit of black hearted tomfoolery that entertains and diverts.

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## **Rob Kitchin says**

This was a book of two halves for me. The first half was a dark, screwball noir, with a strong plot and a suite of interesting characters, both fictional and real. Indeed, the book contains a number of real characters and is rooted in the real myths surrounding Villa's missing head. McDonald provides a rich and colourful back story for Lassiter, with a good degree of depth and complexity to his personality. The story has a good sense of place, historical context, and the right kind of feel as a literary pulp noir story as Lassiter would have written it. It hummed along like a well tuned engine. The second half of the book, however, seemed to run out of pace and ideas, with the last quarter in particular becoming bitty, with a faltering pace and staccato story line. If the second half could have kept the same pace and feel of the first half, this would have unquestionably been a five star read. The unevenness, however, pulled it back into the pack. More than

enough here though for me to seek out other McDonald books.

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### **David says**

From the opening scene in a Mexican cantina to the final highway scene, *Head Games* is at times thrilling and at times poignant. It provides great characters, a fun, wacky plot, and lots of action.

It's 1957 and the head of Pancho Villa is coveted by Prescott Bush and the Yale secret society: Skull and Bones. It's also wanted by a passel of Mexican hoodlums because of a secret the skull possesses. Caught in the middle and causing maximum destruction wherever they go are Hector Lassiter, a pulp fiction author and acquaintance of Orsen Welles, Papa Hemingway and Marlene Dietrich, and a writer and poet Bud Fiske, who is writing an article on Lassiter.

Great storytelling in a wonderful debut. I'll be looking for his second.

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### **Jane says**

Typical effort to make money (and win popularity) off Bashing Bush. Sad commentary of the current environment where fiction rewrites history for personal gain. When the author lowered himself to base descriptions of the Bush family, esp puerile name calling for the efforts of a war hero, I stopped reading. When will this theme work its way out of its system?

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### **Andrew says**

#### **Loved It**

Craig McDonald has written nine books so far featuring his series " hero" Hector Lassiter a pulp novelist, friend to many historical personages of the mid twentieth century and all around adventurer( maybe a cross between the cult author James Crumley and the hard boiled actor Lee Marvin). This pulp adventure, which includes cameos by Orson Welles, Marlene Dietrich and George Bush, senior and junior, is just plain fun and cool. Buying them all. You should too.

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### **Silver Screen Videos says**

Ernest Hemingway would have made a heck of an action hero if he weren't actually a real person. Author Craig McDonald takes that general idea and runs with it in *Head Games*, a novel that introduces a Hemingwayesque writer hero named Hector Lassiter who walked much the same ground that Hemingway did during the 1950's. Hemingway himself doesn't appear in the book (although narrator Lassiter refers on several occasions to a stormy love/hate relationship to Papa Ernest), but several real life celebrities do figure into a story that's largely an entertaining historical fiction romp.

*Head Games* is the same general type of novel as Max Allan Collins' Nathan Heller series of mysteries, in which a fictional investigator rubs shoulders with real life historical celebrities and winds up involved in famous events. Hector Lassiter is a moderately successful pulp fiction writer in the Raymond Chandler mold.

*Head Games* is actually the first Lassiter novel author McDonald wrote, although it takes place largely in the 1950's when Lassiter is in his late 50's (McDonald has since written several other books featuring a younger Lassiter). For that reason, this book is a good place for readers to start in order to get an understanding of the character.

*Head Games* is based on an actual real life mystery that has never been solved. A few years after the death of Pancho Villa, his corpse was dug up and the head cut off and stolen (to this date, it has never been recovered). Rumors have abounded over the years that the skull eventually wound up in the archives of Yale's mysterious Skull and Bones Society, having been purchased by U.S. Senator Prescott Bush (father of George H.W., grandfather of George W.). *Head Games* takes that urban legend and runs with it. The book begins in Mexico with Lassiter coming into possession of the skull from a rather shady acquaintance who acquired it under rather shady circumstances. As soon as he acquires the skull, however, Lassiter literally comes under fire from a whole lot of people, including former Mexican revolutionaries, several groups of Yale frat boys, and some shadowy government types.

*Head Games* can best be classified as an action thriller, and, as such, it's a bit routine, although that may be because it represents the author's first effort in the genre. The book features a series of shootouts and fistfights and one extended car/helicopter pursuit that winds up in Mexico. Other authors have done a better job with this type of material over the years. However, as a piece of faux history, *Head Games* is a highly entertaining and accomplished read. The central mystery (of which I was unaware) is fascinating, and many of the people rumored to have been involved put in an appearance, including Prescott Bush and his grandson George W.

The author has the most fun with a section in which Lassiter takes time to visit the set of Orson Welles's classic film noir *Touch of Evil* to help Welles punch up some dialogue for the film and, along the way, revisit an old girlfriend named Marlene Dietrich. He also enjoys penning fictional reviews of Lassiter's novels and a magazine profile of Lassiter, both of which the narrator then proceeds to criticize. And, in typical hardboiled style, Lassiter proves to have a bit of a cynical, sarcastic with he displays on several occasions.

But *Head Games* is more than a light-hearted romp through an alternative history. It's an examination of growing old, the one thing that Lassiter most fears (as another character notes). As the book progresses, Lassiter finds himself increasingly betrayed by his body failing him, as a result of numerous past excesses in his life. In fact, in one of the book's major action scenes, Lassiter, armed with a sniper rifle, finds himself unable to sight his target because of increasingly blurry vision. The result is a most unusual variation of what might otherwise have been a typical action shootout.

Craig McDonald was an accomplished journalist before writing *Head Games*, and his skill is evident throughout the book in a number of passages both serious and tongue-in-cheek. He was still experiencing some growing pains as a thriller writer (one section in the middle of the book that describes what happened to the skull forty years earlier runs on far too long), but he displays a sure hand in both the more serious passages in the book and Lassiter's interactions with some screen legends. The result is a book that fans of a variety of genres can enjoy. *Head Games* is literary fun and games of a high order.

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## Dillon Strange says

A fun little crime novel set in 1957 about a macho pulp writer named Hector Lassiter with the severed mummified head of Pancho Villa in his car trunk. He's on the run from several rival factions, each angling to

get the head or the treasure map it's supposed to contain. With a myopic poet and a hot mexican chick in tow, he crosses paths with Orson Welles, drinks gallons of hard liquor and leaves a pile of dead bodies in his wake. The whole sordid tale is vaguely based in historical fact which somehow made the book better. For reasons no one can explain, Pancho Villa's head was actually stolen and never recovered. This is a good first novel but the writer has a pretty heavy Hemingway obsession. The book is loaded with conversations about the man and mentions him seemingly every few pages. I had no problem with this, but I could see how some could get annoyed with it. Head Games could easily be turned into a pretty kick ass movie with the right casting and director. This one is well worth the time, especially the ending which was unconventional but worked for me.

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### **Ed says**

Tries much too hard for a Mickey Spillane type of atmosphere with a tough, sardonic detective on the run from bad guys--and a few good guys. Escalating firepower in confrontations beginning with a ornamental bull fighting spear through the eye to hundreds of rounds from sub-machine guns. All the running, driving and shooting exhausted me by page 120 so I gave up, flipping to the last page to see who was still alive.

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