

# Nelson DeMille, best-selling suspense novelist, dies at 81

By **Harrison Smith** The Washington Post, Updated September 19, 2024, 1:49 p.m.



Mr. DeMille, at an author's night in East Hampton, N.Y., in 2014. SCOTT ROTH/SCOTT ROTH/INVISION/AP

Nelson DeMille, who served as an Army platoon leader in Vietnam before returning home to write stylish suspense thrillers and adventure novels, including books that captivated millions of readers with their tales of terrorist plots, Mafia skulduggery, and Long Island killings, died Tuesday at a hospital in Mineola, N.Y. He was 81.

The cause was complications from esophageal cancer, his son Alex said through a spokesman.

A broad-chested writer with a carefully trimmed beard and a fondness for mentoring younger authors, Mr. DeMille had a cheery disposition that could mask his talent at concocting horrifying — and frequently riveting — fictional scenarios. He wrote about airline hijackings, nuclear threats, war-time massacres, and psychotic hostage-takers, balancing the violence with snappy dialogue and wry quips.

“What makes him popular is he does it all,” novelist Harlan Coben told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 2006. “There’s suspense, large themes, humor, and the main character is a guy you want to hang out with — like Nelson himself.”

When Mr. DeMille signed a late-career book deal with Simon & Schuster in 2014, the publishing house estimated that more than 45 million copies of his novels were in print worldwide. Much of the appeal of his books seemed to be summed up in lines from his 2017 novel “*The Cuban Affair*,” about an Army veteran enlisted in a scheme to smuggle millions of dollars out of Havana: “Sex, money, and adventure. Does it get any better than that?”

Mr. DeMille wrote some two dozen novels, many featuring John Corey, a joke-cracking former homicide detective who first appeared in “*Plum Island*” (1997), about an investigation into the murder of a young couple who may have been involved in biological warfare research.

Other books were set in the world of espionage or in the military and drew on Mr. DeMille’s combat experience in Vietnam. During the Tet offensive of 1968, about a third of his company was killed or wounded during a battle in the A Shau Valley, he said. Coming home, he hoped to use that experience in crafting “the great American war novel.”

That ambition didn't quite pan out — his first novels were police procedurals, which he sold to small paperback publishers for \$1,500 each — but he earned praise for later military novels including “Word of Honor” (1985), about a Vietnam veteran who is court-martialed, long after the war's end, for his involvement in a mass killing.

“The military scenes have the gunmetal ring of authenticity,” Time magazine declared, adding that the novel was “‘The Caine Mutiny’ of the '80s, a long, over-the-shoulder look at a time that grows larger as it recedes from sight.”

“Word of Honor” was adapted into a 2003 movie for TNT, starring Don Johnson. It was the second screen adaptation of one of Mr. DeMille's novels, following a 1999 movie version of “The General's Daughter,” a 1992 murder mystery, starring John Travolta and Madeleine Stowe.

Although some of his books featured sensational storylines (such as a right-wing conspiracy, in the 2006 novel “Wild Fire,” to destroy two American cities as cover to justify an attack on the Muslim world), Mr. DeMille said he aimed to write books that were “not plot-oriented” but “character-oriented — sort of a slice of life, the way life could really be.”

He received some of the best reviews of his career for “The Gold Coast” (1990), about a disillusioned WASP lawyer, John Sutter, who lives on the North Shore of Long Island and ends up representing a Mafia kingpin who moves in next door. The novel featured

mob intrigue (Mr. DeMille said he envisioned the book as a combination of “The Godfather” and “The Great Gatsby”) as well as sly observations of the ultrawealthy crowd that frequented the area’s exclusive clubs, such as Piping Rock and the Creek.

“In his way, Mr. DeMille ... is as keen a social satirist as Edith Wharton,” journalist Joanne Kaufman wrote in *The New York Times*. She went on to approvingly cite an observation Mr. DeMille placed in the mouth of Sutter, his novel’s smart-alecky protagonist: “The children of the old rich and privileged are, if nothing else, polite. They are acculturated early and know how to make conversations with adults. They’d rather not, of course, but they’re learning early how to do things they don’t want to do. They will be successful and unhappy adults.”

Mr. DeMille lived for nearly all his life on Long Island and traced his interest in its upper-crust milieu back to childhood: His father, a French Canadian immigrant, was a builder who worked on some of the Gold Coast homes. Mr. DeMille said that much later, when he began researching the novel, he was able to get behind the gates of the estates with help from a tree surgeon who had worked on the properties for 30 years.

The oldest of four brothers, Nelson Richard DeMille was born in Queens on Aug. 23, 1943. He grew up in Elmont, N.Y., where he played football and ran track in high school and studied political science and history at Hofstra University for three years before joining the Army in 1966.

Mr. DeMille received the Bronze Star for his service in Vietnam, and went back to school at Hofstra to earn a bachelor’s degree in 1970. He worked odd jobs for a few years, including as an insurance investigator for Liberty Mutual, while struggling to launch his career as a writer.

At times he used a pen name, including for “The Five-Million-Dollar Woman,” a 1976 biography of journalist Barbara Walters — a paycheck job he said he undertook for the \$2,000 advance — that he published under the pseudonym Ellen Kay, taken from his then-wife’s first two names.

“The book did OK,” he later wrote in an essay, “but I was clearly going nowhere as a writer, no matter what name I used on the cover.”

Mr. DeMille had his first major success with “By the Rivers of Babylon” (1978), about a Concorde jet that is forced by Palestinian terrorists to make a crash landing, en route to a UN peace conference. A decade later, he appeared to have found a new niche as a spy novelist with “The Charm School” (1988), set at the US Embassy in Moscow.

“I said to myself, since the Cold War is going to be around for the next 200 years, you have a career,” he told the Times in 1997. “I had about seven or eight great ideas,” he continued, “but the Cold War ended.”

One of his last novels, “The Maze” (2022), was also rooted in Long Island, inspired by the unsolved serial killings of women near Gilgo Beach. (After the book was published, a Manhattan architect named Rex Heuermann was arrested and charged with murdering six of the women. The case has yet to go to trial.)

Mr. DeMille’s first two marriages, to Ellen Wasserman and Virginia Sindel, ended in divorce. In 2007, he married Sandra “Sandy” Dillingham, whom he met seven years earlier while she was working as his publicity escort on a book tour in Denver. She died of cancer in 2018.

He leaves two children from his first marriage, Lauren and Alex, an author and filmmaker with whom he co-wrote two of his novels; a son from his third marriage, James; and two grandchildren.

Mr. DeMille lived in Garden City, N.Y., in a slate-roofed, Tudor-style home that he partly designed himself. He wrote his books in longhand, with a No. 1 pencil and stacks of yellow legal pads, and was unabashed about his literary ambitions, even as he knew he had little control over his ultimate legacy.

“Charles Dickens was a popular, commercial writer, and now his books are called classics,” he noted in a 2007 interview. “Maybe a few of mine will be classics, hopefully, but if not, not.”

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