

*Article from New Hampshire Union Leader, October 5, 2016*

*'Chasing Mayflies'*

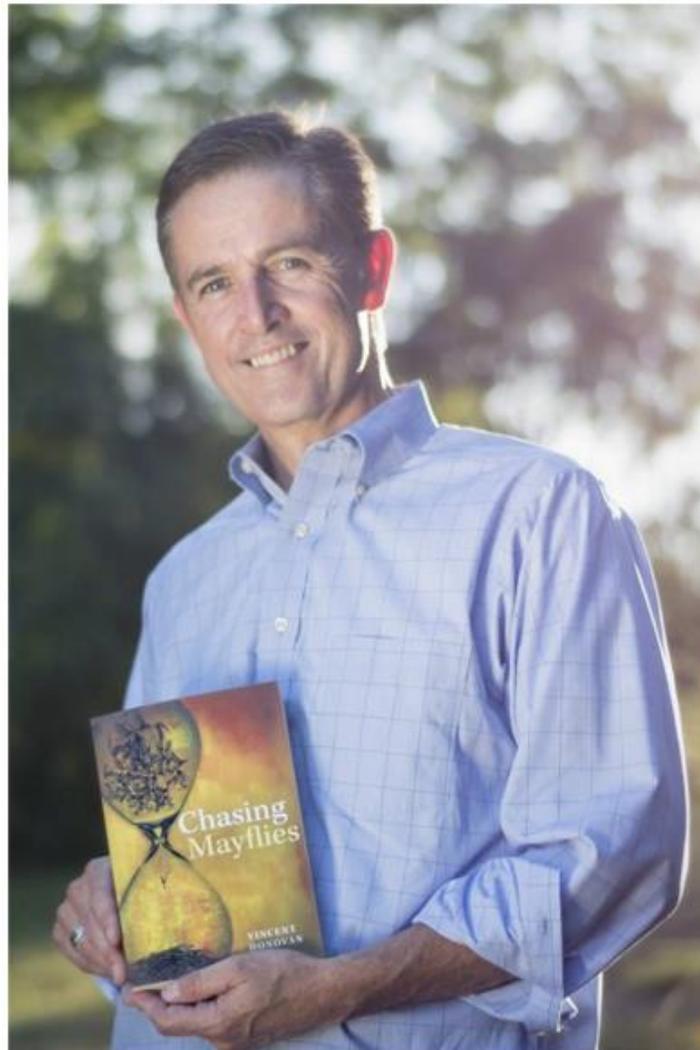
## **Vincent Donovan writes an end-of-life romp with biting wit**

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By JULIA ANN WEEKES

NH Weekend Editor | [October 05, 2016 1:14PM](#)

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Vin Donovan, a Salem native whose novel “Chasing Mayflies” takes a wild end-of-life ride through the Merrimack Valley, wants to get this out in the open: “In full transparency, my mother, brothers and sisters did break my father out of hospice the day before he died — but legally.”

His father’s last days, and how his family tried to give him a little peace at the end of his battle with cancer, definitely has stayed with Donovan over the years. But “Chasing Mayflies,” about a dying man’s request for help in taking care of a few things before his judgment day, is a decidedly more upbeat take on going out in style, proverbial guns blazing.

In movie terms, it’s a bit like “Dead Poets Society” meets “Bucket List,” with Robin Williams as a writing teacher urging his students to “seize the day” on paper and in life and Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson checking off items on a must-do list before checking out.

## Mix of Emotions

“Chasing Mayflies,” too, is a rallying call that mixes regret with redemption, sentiment with sarcasm. Jack Nagle is a Vietnam veteran whose rash actions and need for an adrenaline rush has ruined relationships with family and friends. Facing imminent death, the hard-hitting gambler decides to right some wrongs, but conventional death-bed apologies aren’t enough. He enlists the help of childhood friend Dennis, a widower with a serious Juicy Fruit gum habit and an overwhelming compulsion to stick to life inside the lines. To mend fences, the duo knocks down some emotional and physical barriers, complete with car chases and cutting quips.

“So much of today’s fiction about end-of-life themes tend to be heavy on tales of self-absorption,” Donovan, 58, said. “While my Dad was the opposite of the Jack in this R.I.P.-roaring, bittersweet journey, he would recognize some of the specific content and certainly agree with its central message that it’s never too late to set things right.”

“Chasing Mayflies” is set in Salem — with references to Rockingham Park, St. Joseph Church, Field of Dreams, Kelley Library, Salem High School, Canobie Lake Park and Pine Grove Cemetery — and nearby Haverhill, Mass.

Southern New Hampshire is familiar territory for Donovan, who said he grew up in the Granite State, earning a master’s degree from Rivier University in Nashua. He retired last January after 27 years from life science company MilliporeSigma (so named after a 2015 merger between Sigma-Aldrich and EMD Millipore) to focus on writing.

“It is not a cliché to say there are no guaranteed tomorrows,” Donovan said. “I decided to make a major life change in order to make new memories with my wife (Robin), who sacrificed so much during my career, (and) spend more time with my family and new grandson ... I’m trying to embrace my bucket list now.”

## Making Changes

Donovan's father's death from lung cancer in 2009 after a five-year fight contributed to that decision.

"How he lived and died remains a lesson for his six children, two dozen grandchildren and three great grandchildren," Donovan said. "At the same time, his death made me reflect about facing regrets."

Donovan said that while working at then Millipore Corp. in the bioprocessing division, which served the pharmaceutical market, he would read about advances in monoclonal and recombinant protein drugs in the pipeline and keep an eye out for clinical trials underway for non-small-cell lung cancer.

"My father (also named Vincent) fought this terrible disease with the legendary tenacity of Rocky (actor Sylvester Stallone's prize-fighting boxer)," Donovan said. "No matter how hard it punched, he always answered the next bell. My father took a number of newly approved blockbuster drugs as well as traditional chemo, and while they certainly lengthened his life, they came with painful side effects.

"But no matter how sick he felt, he would put on dress shirt and tie so the doctors would not deem him too ill for the next infusion," Donovan said.

"He never complained even when he had to have blood transfusions, self-injections, endless hospital and doctor appointments — and even unrelated heart surgery to deal with severe blockages. I still wince about his last trip to the hospital. He could hardly walk and discovered the elevator was out of service but somehow he willed himself down a flight of stairs with my mother's help."

## Breaking out

Donovan in his book's acknowledgements says he "never felt closer to my mother, brothers and sisters than I did in helping our Dad to his heavenly home." That involved moving him from a hospice facility less than 24 hours after he was admitted because the family was concerned about medication protocol and his level of comfort and care, Donovan said. While he'd rather not name that facility, Donovan said his father was moved to the Lahey Clinic (now called The Lahey Hospital and Medical Center) in Burlington, Mass.

"I still chuckle that shortly before he passed, he received his scheduled dose of prescription antacid — no doubt, he was ready for quite a feast in heaven with no risk of heartburn," Donovan said, with the same sense of humor he infuses into the flawed and funny protagonists of his book.

Though the premise of the story hits close to home, Donovan wanted to put some distance between his experiences with hospice and the unnamed Massachusetts facility where his father was placed.

“I love Salem, so located the fictional hospice there in my book,” Donovan said. “I wanted to keep it far away from the actual location, as I didn’t want to court publicity or legal considerations that might detract from the meaning of the story ... Hospice provides such comfort, but my family had a different experience. Some of the quotes I used in the opening chapters, like ‘Does he eat?’ or ‘He isn’t done yet,’ were true.”

The cover of “Chasing Mayflies,” too, suggest living life to the fullest. In a design by eLectio Publishing and Michael Beaudoin, an hourglass replaces grains of sand with mayflies, some buzzing about in the top glass bulb and others dropping lifeless into the bottom sphere.

Jack, with his gruff all-or-nothing attitude, explains the significance of the insects to Dennis this way: “Their life span is only a few weeks at most and they’re at the mercy of the wind. But they’re like tiny kamikazes attacking your eyes, taking a bite out of your scalp and almost making you wish for winter again. They live for today, but make you remember them forever. Chasing mayflies, that’s my new mantra. I want to be just like them, and you should too.”

Donovan said reference to insects in the book comes from his own youth spent swatting at what today are commonly called black flies, which have a lifespan of a few weeks. Mayflies technically don’t bite or sting, and they live for just a day or two.

Donovan said he decided to use his childhood name for the no-holds-barred bugs in his book, which conjures summers spent in the New Hampshire outdoors.

“When I was growing up in Salem, we referred to those nasty biting bugs as ‘mayflies’ or ‘May bugs’ as they were a rite of spring. We didn’t use the black-fly description though they were probably one in the same,” Donovan said of the tenacious biters.

Either way, the message is the same: carpe diem.