State of Inspiration
Living the writer’s life in Florida

MEET THE FLORIDA BOOK AWARD AUTHORS • LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD WINNER JEFF KLINKENBERG
PULITZER PRIZE WINNER JACK DAVIS • TRACING MARJORY STONEMAN DOUGLAS' FLORIDA JOURNEY

ALSO INSIDE
MIGHTY STORMS: HOW HURRICANES SHAPE FLORIDA
¡VIVA LA FAMILIA! THE TRADITIONS AND RECIPES BEHIND FLORIDA’S OLDEST RESTAURANT
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Celebrating the power of the word

Words, carefully chosen and placed in the right order, convey who we are and what we value. It is no surprise that literature, poetry, and the study of languages are considered essential humanities studies. We cannot understand ourselves or each other — and we cannot understand our history, theology, philosophy or culture — when our words are misunderstood or not clearly stated. At the core of all we are as humans is the word.

In this edition of FORUM, we celebrate well-chosen words, including our annual review of the Florida Book Award winners.

These writers, Florida treasures all, demonstrate every day the wisdom so aptly expressed by the late writer-philosopher Susan Sontag. When asked to distill her most essential advice on the craft of writing, Sontag responded: “Love words, agonize over sentences. And pay attention to the world.”

We also highlight Jeff Klinkenberg, the Florida Humanities Council’s 2018 Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing recipient. “Nobody writes about the real Florida with as much insight and affection as Jeff Klinkenberg,” writes Carl Hiaasen, another of Florida’s great authors. If the humanities are the stories of our human experiences, then Jeff is our state’s master storyteller.

And we talk to University of Florida professor and author, Jack Davis, who recently won the Pulitzer Prize for his environmental history, The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea. Both Davis and Klinkenberg are on the Council’s roster of speakers. Please contact us if you wish to schedule a presentation by these amazing authors.

The Florida Book Awards banquets are always inspiring, and the latest one was no exception. In fact, it sparked an idea you will see in these pages:

Upon receiving his Florida Book Award, D. Bruce Means, a noted scientist now in his 70s, thanked his high school English teacher for introducing him to Shakespeare and for teaching him the discipline required to write well.

More than half a century later, the author still felt the influence of that teacher and thought it appropriate to recognize him.

I suspect most of us experienced a special English teacher. I had two in ninth grade; Miss Blessing taught me to diagram sentences and Miss Hart taught the elements of speech-giving (along with being a strict grammarian). How I communicate today is largely because of what they taught. Neither is still alive, but I thank them and honor their memory.

So here’s our idea:

Let’s start a movement today to thank our favorite English teachers. You’ll see D. Bruce Means’ piece as our first “A Teacher to Remember” essay. Write us at jlevine@flahum.org or send a video explaining how an English teacher changed your life. We’d love to compile and share them. This would be an appropriate tribute to those who have kept those carefully chosen words alive.

Steve Seibert

We would like to acknowledge the generous support of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Council on Arts and Culture.
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ON THE COVER: Pulitzer Prize winner author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings at her Cross Creek home.
PHOTO BY ALAN ANDERSON, COURTESY OF THE MARJORIE KINNAN RAWLINGS PAPERS, SPECIAL AND AREA STUDIES COLLECTIONS, GEORGE A. SMATHERS LIBRARIES, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA.

Like us on Facebook
Exploring our connections

Francie Nolan, 11 years old, sits reading in her favorite place, the fire escape outside her cold water flat in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. If there was ever a better heroine for a bookish child of any era, I’ve yet to meet her. If there ever was a better place to read, I’ve yet to find it.

Through the pages of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, I found a friend who saw the world the way I did, never mind that she lived in a tenement around the time of World War 1.

The comfort of that, the joy of that, is what makes reading the indescribable gift that it is.

It’s fascinating, as we put together issues of this magazine, to watch as a picture begins to form. It’s like a photographic image rising from a chemical bath, or a jigsaw puzzle revealing itself, tiny piece by tiny piece, slowly, and then all of a sudden, there it is.

A picture comes into focus and we see those unexpected interconnections that remind us there’s a theme that runs through much of life.

In this issue, we cast our eyes on subjects that seem completely distinct from one another: Books — and the writing of books — and hurricanes.

And yet, as with most things, there’s a link: In this case, it’s the strength and power they each wield.

In this issue, we tell the stories of some of Florida’s top writers. Our state has a deep tradition of serving as muse to some of literature’s most esteemed figures, from Ernest Hemingway to Zora Neale Hurston to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings (pictured on our cover in a quintessential moment, at her typewriter surrounded by the wild beauty of her Cross Creek property).

In a state abundant with rich talent, we meet the winners of the Florida Book Awards and learn what motivates and drives them; we hear the tales of longtime storyteller Jeff Klinkenberg, winner of the 2018 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for writing; and explore with Jack E. Davis, the University of Florida history professor, how his newly minted Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea*, came to be.

And we are struck by the power we discover in these stories — of imagination, of perseverance, of the driving need to write, and the power of the completed creation itself.

From the power of creativity we turn to the massive power of nature — to upend our plans, reshape our environments, and remake the life and development of our state.

Whether you are a native Floridian or a transplanted one, you learn early on what it means to live in the hurricane state. There is no rite of passage quite like living through the fury of a mighty storm. Writers Gary Mormino, Eliot Kleinberg, Sherry Johnson, and Ron Cunningham take a look at how our wild weather has impacted our recent and more distant history, and look at how some experts in emergency management suggest we plan for storms of the future. The stories are compelling.

So, too, is our Heritage Kitchen feature this issue, which looks at the 113-year family history and traditions of the Columbia Restaurant, which has been serving the same Cuban and Spanish recipes introduced by the original members of the Hernandez/Gonzmart family in 1905.

There are many more stories in this issue, including an insider’s visit to Key West; an interview with the new president of the Florida Library Association; a look back at writer/activist Marjory Stoneman Douglas’ early years in Florida; a profile of the state’s Poetry Out Loud competition winner; and our first A Teacher to Remember essay.

We thank you for your support and we hope you enjoy this issue. We’d love to hear from you — your feedback, suggestions, and ideas for future issues. My email is jlevine@flahum.org.

Thanks for reading and happy autumn.

Jacki Levine

Look for FORUM Magazine three times a year starting now.
FORUM Contributors

Tom Corcoran is a longtime Florida writer/photographer who has provided photos for six Jimmy Buffett albums and has written eight crime novels set in the Florida Keys.

Betty Cortina-Weiss is a South Florida writer who believes salsa, the kind eaten and the kind danced to, makes the world a better place. She specializes in food and lifestyle stories, and her work has appeared in Saveur, People, O, The Oprah Magazine, Latina and Miami’s INDULGE, where she served as founding editor-in-chief for four years.

Ron Cunningham is a University of Florida graduate and former editor-in-chief of the Independent Florida Alligator. He was a reporter at the Fort Lauderdale Sun Sentinel, higher education reporter at The Gainesville Sun, and Tallahassee bureau chief for The New York Times Florida Newspapers, before serving as editorial page editor at The Gainesville Sun until 2013.

Jack E. Davis is a professor of history at the University of Florida and author of An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century, which won the gold medal from the Florida Book Awards in 2009, and The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea, which won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize in history.

Bill DeYoung is the author of Skyway: The True Story of Tampa Bay’s Signature Bridge and the Man Who Brought It Down and Phil Gernhard, Record Man. Nationally recognized for his music journalism, he has been a writer and editor at various Florida and Georgia newspapers for more than three decades.

Sherry Johnson is professor of history at Florida International University, Miami, and vice-president of the Florida Historical Society. She writes on historical climate change, hurricanes, and other extreme events, and the social and environmental history of Florida and the Caribbean. Her most recent book, Climate and Catastrophe in Cuba and the Atlantic World (UNC Press, 2011) won the Gordon K. and Sybil Lewis Best Book Prize from the Caribbean Studies Association in 2012.

Eliot Kleinberg is a South Florida native, is a staff writer for the Palm Beach Post and the author of 10 books, including Black Cloud: The Deadly Hurricane of 1928 (Florida Historical Society Press). Besides covering local news, he writes extensively about Florida and its history and lectures regularly on hurricanes.

William McKeen is the author or editor of 13 books, including Mile Marker Zero, Outlaw Journalist, Everybody Had an Ocean, Highway 61, Too Old to Die Young, Rock and Roll is Here to Stay, and Homegrown in Florida. He teaches at Boston University and chairs its journalism department. He has seven children and lives on the rocky shore of Massachusetts Bay.
100 Faces of War

September 1, 2018 - November 25, 2018

Witness the pride, sacrifice, and humanity of those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, in their own words.

100 Faces of War is an exhibition organized for travel by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service in collaboration with artist Matt Mitchell.

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Gary Mormino is the Frank E. Duckwall professor of history emeritus at University of South Florida St. Petersburg, where he is also scholar in residence at the Florida Humanities Council.

Barbara Peters Smith is writer for the Sarasota Herald-Tribune’s health and aging beat and editor of its Health+Fitness section, and has served on the Herald-Tribune’s editorial board. She has a bachelor’s degree from Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism and master’s in American studies from the University of South Florida. She has been a fellow in the Gerontological Society of America’s journalism program, and at Columbia University’s Age Boom Academy.

Jon Wilson is a communications consultant for the Florida Humanities Council. He retired as a reporter and editor after 36-plus years with the St. Petersburg Times and Evening Independent.

Chris Zuppa is a visual storyteller who has produced videos for clients including Hillsborough County Schools, Moffitt Cancer Center, and Visit Florida. A photojournalist for the Tampa Bay Times (formerly the St. Petersburg Times) for nearly 12 years, his awards include a first place in the news video division at the 2013 National Press Photographers Association’s Best of Photojournalism competition.

PHOTO BY RACHEL S. O’HARA
Bringing the American experience home

War, sports, and rural life — Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service’s current exhibitions tour Florida with powerful insights into how we live

By Jon Wilson

Most of us don’t know war. But the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) exhibit 100 Faces of War discloses the weight of experience our servicemen and servicewomen carry from Iraq and Afghanistan. See their faces and absorb their words. As you get to know them, their souls will reach for yours.

Artist Matt Mitchell captured the service members in sensitive oil portraits that suggest each subject’s character. The veterans’ personal, from-the-heart statements enhance each portrait.

100 Faces of War is one of three SITES exhibits on tour in Florida during 2018-19. The other two, Hometown Teams: How Sports Shape America, which looks at the impact of sports on our lives; and Crossroads: Change in Rural America, which examines the heart and soul of rural communities, are part of Smithsonian’s Museum on Main Street program. The MoMS program aims to bring resources of the Smithsonian to small towns and rural areas.

The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service has more than 50 exhibitions on tour at any given time, with up to 20 more in various stages of planning and production. On average, SITES sends its exhibitions to more than 250 communities across the nation in almost every state each year. These exhibits go to museums, libraries, science centers, historical societies, community centers, botanical gardens, schools, and shopping malls.

The 100 Faces exhibition includes a portrait of Navy Petty Officer Second Class Donisha Lindsey, a Navy aviation maintenance administrator.

“I was checking an aircraft engine below decks when Shock and Awe was executed,” Lindsey wrote in her statement. “America’s dominance was about to rain down on our enemies and my military friends were out there. Here I am on an air conditioned ship ... no matter what I do in life I will always remember that the soldiers, sailors and airmen are my brothers and sisters in arms; they are my family no matter where they serve or what uniform they wear.”

Some of the portraits toured as Mitchell completed them, but the entire exhibition went on the road after Mitchell finished it in 2014. The Smithsonian recently decided to include the exhibition in its traveling program — and its first stop was Daytona Beach, where it opened on Sept. 1 at the Museum of Arts and Sciences.

The project took Mitchell nine years to complete. His work represents a cross section of those who served.

“I dream that this will be a place that veterans can come to, and the public can come to, to contemplate their experience in war in the company of people who understand,” Mitchell said in an interview with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

In a cutting-edge exploration of major American cultural trends, the Smithsonian created the MoMS exhibition Crossroads: Change in Rural America. It looks at the impact of the migration of people from rural to urban communities that has decreased America’s rural population from 40 percent of the nation’s total count in 1900 to 18 percent by 2010.

MoMS project director Robbie Davis, who led the Crossroads initiative, believes the dynamic is important for all to know and understand:

“The exhibition explores how rural communities changed over the past 100 years and how they will continue to evolve,” Davis says. “One of Crossroads’ core goals is to foster conversations about the future of rural America by encouraging host organizations to engage with the public by discussing local issues and changes important to their communities. The Smithsonian’s hope is that Crossroads will be an opportunity for Florida’s small towns to tell their own stories in their own words through local exhibitions and programs.”

2018–19 Exhibitions schedule

100 Faces of War
Daytona Beach — Sept. 1 through Nov. 25, 2018
Hometown Teams: How Sports Shape America
Fernandina Beach — Through Sept. 22, 2018
Chipley — Sept. 29 through Nov. 10, 2018
Port St. Joe — Nov. 17 through Dec. 29, 2018
Crossroads: Change in Rural America
Cedar Key — Sept. 8 through Oct. 20, 2018
Callahan — Oct. 27 through Dec. 8, 2018
Live Oak — Dec. 15 through Jan. 26, 2019
Bartow — Feb. 2 through March 16, 2019
Havana — March 23 through May 4, 2019
DeFuniak Springs — May 11 through June 22, 2019

FLORIDA Humanities Today
An alliance to enrich the state
The Smithsonian shares its resources with Florida

The Florida Humanities Council has long worked closely with the Smithsonian Institution.

Myriam Springuel, director of the the legendary museum complex’s Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) and Smithsonian Affiliates, talks about one strong new Florida collaboration, 100 Faces of War (see related story).

“We are doing the exhibition because we think it is a very powerful exhibition, and it sends a very powerful message,” Springuel says.

Springuel has a strong Florida connection. Early in her career, the native of Belgium curated fine arts exhibitions and developed education programs at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota.

“The Florida Humanities Council has been a long-standing, very important partner to us,” she says.

Robbie Davis, a project director of SITES Museum on Main Street (MoMs) program, tells FORUM: “In partnership with state partners, like the Florida Humanities Council, we help foster a community’s curiosity about itself and build a pride of place.”

The outreach isn’t only for Florida. It consistently benefits the entire nation, offering perspective on the many dynamics of American culture, and it aims to serve communities that may not be regularly exposed to the Smithsonian’s resources.

“For 25 years, the Smithsonian has been sharing the wealth of its collections and research with small towns and rural communities through the Museum on Main Street program,” Davis says.

Another Smithsonian outreach is its affiliate program. It develops long-term partnerships with museums and educational organizations to make collections and resources widely available.

Florida has 14 affiliate museums in 11 cities: Bradenton, Clewiston, Daytona Beach, Kennedy Space Center, Lakeland, Miami (2), Miami Beach (2), Naples, Orlando (2), St. Augustine, and Tampa.

Remembering Tom Lang

Florida Humanities Council board member Tom Lang passed away on Sunday, April 22, 2018. He was appointed by Gov. Rick Scott to the board in 2015. Though he served less than three years, he made an immediate impact on the work of the FHC. He will be missed tremendously.

Born in Ohio, Lang grew up in Pass-A-Grille Beach. He attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned a bachelor of science in economics and a master of business administration from the Wharton School. He served in the U.S. Navy from 1968-1972, later returning to Florida to earn his juris doctor degree from Florida State University. He then moved to Orlando and practiced law for more than 40 years. He was a member of Cathedral Church of St. Luke, where he was a Sunday school teacher and served as a senior warden.

His interests included people, history, the Civil War, travel, photography, sports, and walking his dog, Goldie. Lang is survived by his wife, Marilyn, three children, and four grandchildren. We offer our sincerest condolences to his family.

What We’re Watching

View these videos at floridahumanities.org/blog

The Florida Humanities Archives is full of resources to watch, read and hear. Among them are videos produced with FHC support.

“In Their Own Words: Perseverance and Resilience in Two Florida Fishing Communities,” tells the stories of commercial fishermen in Cedar Key and Cortez.

The archives contain many videos telling the story of our veterans. View “Veterans — The Telling Project,” produced with WEDU PBS, premiered in November 2015.

What we’re reading

In each issue, FORUM celebrates the joy of reading by offering a favorite book to consider. In this issue, Sally Bradshaw, owner of Tallahassee’s Midtown Reader book store, recommends Florida, by Lauren Groff, published this year. Groff, who lives in Gainesville, is The New York Times bestselling author of three novels, The Monsters of Templeton, Arcadia, and Fates and Furies, and the celebrated short story collection Delicate Edible Birds. In 2017, she was named one of Granta’s Best Young American Novelists.

Says Bradshaw: “I am overwhelmed by Lauren Groff. A Gainesville resident and former finalist for the National Book Award, Groff’s story-telling weaves wild Florida — snakes, dogs, raccoons, cockroaches even — with the wildness of human nature in this remarkable and surprising collection. Teeming with loneliness, longing, love, and ultimately life, Groff’s short stories prove once again that she is at the top of her game and that this strange land so many of us call home is both antagonist and protagonist — a character all its own.” Groff will appear at Midtown Reader on Oct. 26. www.midtownreader.com

To suggest a book of your own, please email jlevine@flahum.org.

What’s your favorite American novel?


These are a few of our nation’s 100 best-loved novels, as chosen in a national survey as part of The Great American Read, which began in May. For information, to see the top 100 novels, and to vote for your favorite, visit floridahumanities.org. You can vote for your favorite through Oct. 18.
My first and most vivid recollection of school was in a one-room country schoolhouse in Calabasas, California. My first-grade teacher, Miss Theresa Thilmony, wrote the word “butterfly” on the blackboard. I sounded out “but-ter-fly,” and was thrilled when I suddenly recognized the connection between the written and spoken word. That inspired a lifelong love of reading and writing.

When I was 9, my family migrated to Alaska over the long dirt track that became the Alcan Highway. I grew up on a homestead above Cook Inlet in the Chugach Mountains. Our family built a large log home out of the property’s trees and it was my job to keep the four fireplaces furnished with wood. Fireplaces were not effective, so my dad handed me a shovel when the thaw came and charged me with digging a partial basement for a wood-burning furnace, which I also kept fueled all winter.

I also maintained our large vegetable garden, among many other chores. With that background and having grown to 6-feet-4 inches tall by 16, it wasn’t a surprise that I was athletic. I was the only one of my freshmen classmates to letter in football, and by my junior year, I wore the three stripes on my letter sweater proudly. In short, I was a high school jock. That was the year when I elected to take the advanced English course taught by Mr. Wendell Crouch.

My first and most vivid recollection of school was in a one-room country schoolhouse in Calabasas, California. My first-grade teacher, Miss Theresa Thilmony, wrote the word “butterfly” on the blackboard. I sounded out “but-ter-fly,” and was thrilled when I suddenly recognized the connection between the written and spoken word. That inspired a lifelong love of reading and writing.

So in 1958, I found myself sitting in the front row when Mr. Crouch walked into class. And, yes, I sat there in my athletic sweater with no trepidation. He was short and thin with black hair and a slight smirk. He peered at me over his glasses as he passed and gave me a knowing look that might have been “What the hell are YOU doing here?” Unbeknownst to him, I was there for an intellectual challenge, not a personality clash.

On that first day, Mr. Crouch had the class arrange our desks in a large half-circle around him. I’d never before (or since) seen a teacher exhibit such an independence of classroom protocol, and at once I knew I had the right choice. His class required a lot of reading, report writing, and sentence diagramming. I worked my tail off, loving every minute.

He gave me a special assignment that started me on a long career of knowing how to research any kind of academic problem. It was a library research project on the history of

Do you have an English teacher to remember? We’d love to hear your story. Please email Jacki Levine at jlevine@flahum.org
Amenhotep IV, who became Ahkenaten, the monotheistic Egyptian Sun King.

I hung on Mr. Crouch’s every word and was intellectually stimulated by him as no other teacher. I don’t recall the moment when Mr. Crouch didn’t see me as a dumb jock, but he was so impressed with my interest in English, literature, and creative writing that in my senior year when I was no longer in his class, he would bring me from his library individually bound copies of Shakespeare’s plays to read.

My love of learning came from my parents, especially my mom, but Mr. Crouch had a large positive influence on me. Motivated to obtain the first college education in my family, I struggled for years to accomplish it. Married at 18, I drove trucks in South Florida to establish residency so I could attend college without paying out-of-state tuition.

In September 1961, I entered Florida State University and — with the help of my spouse — worked my way on and off to a bachelor of science degree in biology in 1968. That year I had occasion to visit Anchorage where I had attended high school. I made a pilgrimage to Mr. Crouch’s home, where I told him what a wonderful teacher he had been and to thank him for inspiring me.

Fast forward 50 years. I wish Mr. Crouch could see me now and let me tell him again what a wonderful teacher he was and how he's inspired me over the years.

Since I last thanked him, I have published 10 nonfiction books and some 300 scientific research papers, popular articles, and reports. I am living a wonderful life of intellectual pursuits, including teaching. Much of what I do and have accomplished are linked to a wry little English teacher who recognized me as an inspired student feeding on his every word … and not a dumb teenage jock.

D. Bruce Means is a research ecologist and adjunct professor of biology at Florida State University, where he earned his Ph.D. in ecology. His book, Diamonds in the Rough, won the silver medal in general nonfiction in this year’s Florida Book Awards.
In love with the modern library

Florida Library Association president Sarah Hammill talks about an evolving cultural center that’s far more than just a warehouse for books

By Jacki Levine

So how does a small-town girl from upstate New York with an itch for exploration end up as the newest president of the Florida Library Association?

When you ask Sarah Hammill, business and online learning librarian at Florida International University, she describes a creative path with some unexpected twists and turns, much like the evolution of today’s libraries.

Hammill hails from Rooseveltown, a tiny hamlet of fewer than 100 people in upstate New York.

“(It) does not appear on most maps, but Canada, the Akwesasne Mohawk Indian Reservation, and Massena border the town,” Hammill says.

She now finds herself happily living in Miami Beach, where she enjoys eclectic pursuits including “yoga, biking, travel, wine tasting, and of course, reading.”

As Hammill begins her term as FLA president, she talks to FORUM about the evolution and future of today’s libraries, no longer considered mere “book warehouses,” but ever-changing cultural centers that feature everything from business-plan and coding-skills training to yoga classes and aromatherapy sessions.

How did you decide to become a librarian?

“After finishing my undergraduate degree, I didn’t know what I wanted to do so I moved to Ireland to become a barmaid.

“It was a year of traveling, meeting people, and having fun. When the year ended, I still didn’t know what I wanted to do and was more broke than when I began my trip.

“So I moved back to Rooseveltown and was lucky enough to get a full-time position at the Akwesasne Library and Cultural Center. That job changed my life and steered me to where I am today.

“Because we were a small staff, I learned about the many facets of running a library.

“It was a great job, but after two years, I was itching to start exploring again. I traveled across the country to New Mexico, where I worked in customer service but felt incomplete.

“I took classes at the University of New Mexico to explore different career paths while working part-time at the UNM library and volunteering at the public library.”

And the life-changing moment …

“One day my mentor said, ‘Sarah, you can’t continue to take out student loans and work part time. You need to get a library degree.’

“This set me on my path to study at Indiana University.

“From Indiana, I landed in Miami. I applied for a position at FIU, and when I flew down for the interview, I fell in love with Miami. I said to myself, ‘If I don’t get the job, I am moving here regardless.’

“Looking back now, I wonder what I would have done about those student loans, but I did get the job — that was 17 years ago.

“Through a circuitous route … I found my way to Miami Beach, Florida. It is hard to imagine living anywhere else.”

What is the Florida Library Association?

“The FLA is a statewide organization that promotes excellence in Florida libraries by advocating strongly for libraries and providing high-quality professional and leadership development for a diverse community of library staff, volunteers, and supporters.

“In ‘Sarah parlance,’ FLA is the best library organization, where you can meet library ‘peeps’ from across the state. It is a place to share ideas, network, and have fun.”

Your mission as president?

“I will continue the great traditions of the past, such as advocating for libraries throughout the state, creating a sense of community among members, and adding value to membership through professional development. I hope members will see FLA as their professional home for all things library related.”
How are libraries different today than in the past?

“The great thing about libraries is that they are always changing. When I worked at the Akwesasne Library and Cultural Center, everything we did was with paper, including using a physical card catalog. Today, so much of what we do is online — from searching for books, to finding articles, to contacting a colleague in another city.

“Once upon a time, libraries were considered book warehouses, and librarians as information gatekeepers. That definitely has changed.

“Libraries are now cultural centers where meet-ups happen for sewing clubs, book clubs, gaming, ukulele bands, aromatherapy sessions, yoga classes, gardening classes, and more.

“Librarians offer opportunities and training for communities to learn geo-mapping, coding skills, 3D printing, to apply for jobs, create resumes and cover letters, create business plans, apply for government benefits, search for cars, to practice language skills and more.”

And what will the library of the future look like?

“Ever evolving and changing based on the needs of its community ... Electronic formats and print formats will coexist. Libraries will continue to adapt technology and serve as community centers and places of refuge for all. They will continue to provide skills training, community engagement, and quiet study spaces for communities.”

Another crystal-ball question: What’s your prediction for the future of the delivery of the written word?

“When e-books and e-readers made a splash, there was a lot of speculation that the printed book would disappear. But I think print is here to stay. Browsing through online titles just can’t replace browsing through print books on a shelf. It doesn’t replace the smell and feel of print books.

“But I think e-books will coexist ... Books in electronic format are great for referencing information and easy to carry for traveling.”

What is your favorite book?

“Two that come to mind are Building a Bridge and The Grapes of Wrath.

“Building a Bridge by Lisa Shook Begaye is a simple story, but the lesson is relevant to any situation involving people.

“I read The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck in high school after I broke my leg in a car accident. I became so deeply engrossed that I was happy to stay home. I think this was the first time I felt like I was a part of the book — I moved through the Dust Bowl and struggled right alongside the family.”

Are you currently reading something you’d recommend?

“I recently finished An Invisible Thread by Laura Schroff and Alex Tresniowski. What a great story of how chance can change your life.

Tell us about The Great American Read.

“It is a celebration of reading — a PBS eight-part series that explores reading through America’s 100 best-loved novels. It features information on the books with testimonials from authors, celebrities, and book lovers. The Florida Humanities Council (FHC) and FLA are co-sponsors of the Florida public broadcast of the series.

“The launch of the series took place in May and kicked off a summer of reading and voting for America’s No. 1 novel and culminates in October. You can see the list of books at the website pbs.org/the-great-american-read.”
True Key West

Top of your must-do list? Surrender to the singular scents, sights, and sounds of the Southernmost City

By William McKeen
Photos by Tom Corcoran

There isn't a change of seasons but there is a change of aromas on the island. While the rest of the nation slogs through fall and winter, Key West goes through changes that have nothing to do with climate.

The people there are proprietary about sunset, but they could also argue for a patent on morning. Nobody does daybreak like Key West. Walk by La Grignote and smell Cuban bread baking. At Five Brothers Grocery, get a whiff of the sofrito they put on the stove right after sunup. Salute the assembled army of creased señors standing around Riviera Coffee on Flagler, drinking rip-your-head-off espresso and pondering the news from that island 90 miles away. Gringos wait for their cafe con leche and cheese bread, eavesdropping, trying to pick out words from the ancient, guttural Spanish. A Buick Riviera comes to a dead stop in the middle of Flagler to let a rooster cross. A woman in a flowered dress waves as she pedals her beach cruiser toward Old Town.

It's worth setting an alarm to enjoy the gentle sun-drenched spectacle of Key West yawning itself awake. The aromas that come as mainlanders head south mark that shift-change.
of smells: the scent of seaweed, mingling with frangipani and gardenias; the sea and its cacophony of fragrances; the good-natured incoherence of people awaiting their first coffee, the blinding edge of a too-bright morning.

Too many travelers heading for Key West celebrate the night life, the laissez faire attitude, and the party-hearty ethos of those doing the Duval Crawl down the city’s avenue of drunkenness and debauchery. A few years back, I wrote a book called *Mile Marker Zero* about the town and its role in shaping the nation’s literary and musical identity. Along the way, I discovered some stories about Key West that made my wavy brown locks stand on end. The little village could offer larger cities advanced degrees in vice and depravity. Some have co-opted the phrase borrowed from a larger sin city — what happens in Key West stays in Key West.

Yes, there’s that Key West. But to see only that version of the Southernmost City is to miss the point. It’s not a typical tourist destination and does not require a checklist of things to do and places to go.

The whole point is to do nothing.

Plan to dawdle at breakfast. You can’t go wrong at Blue

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*Mallory Square Conch Train Depot and Aquarium: The conch trains are a popular way to see the town.*

*Key West Art and Historical Society’s Old Custom House Museum highlights the culture of the Florida Keys through displays of regional art, architecture and history.*
Heaven, where you dine outside, among the roosters. If you want to breathe the rarefied air where Ernest Hemingway and Hunter S. Thompson had their mammoth breakfasts — decades apart, of course — go to Pepe’s, down near Schooner Wharf.

Even the natives like the Conch Train. It looks like a rinky-dink tram through town — perhaps because it is — but the tour guides know their history and even the locals admit they always learn something.

Give Key West Cemetery at least a day. The above-ground monuments give it a New Orleans vibe. The sculptures and inscriptions are some of the most amusing in the history of death. It’s in the center of town, surrounded by a fortress of ficus.

You will redraw the parameters of “fresh seafood” after eating at the Half Shell or Turtle Kraals. If you are so inclined — after venturing out on a charter — slap the catch on the marina bar at the Half Shell, wash the fish gore from the hull, clean up, and go inside where your fish has been expertly cooked.

Naps are recommended. That’s plural. You probably need more than one a day. Doing nothing is strenuous.

Every night in Key West, hundreds of tourists come to Mallory Square to watch sunset — which is as much a place as an event. Crowds gather to watch the magnificent spectacle in the company of jugglers, mimes, and strolling guitarists. There’s usually a drum circle going.

When the stars come out, find Barry Cuda at B.O.’s Fish Wagon. His piano is on mini-Firestones and he pushes it around town, playing piano blues and naughty R&B. He’s an essential part of any healthy Key West diet.

It’s hard to go anywhere in Key West and not feel the history rumbling beneath your feet. Humans have lived on the island since 3000 B.C., and tribal wars between the Calusa and Tequesta may explain the piles of bones found by Spanish explorers who named it Island of Bones (Cayo Hueso on the first maps of the region). Pirates found the island a perfect venue from which to stage their assaults, and the Navy also recognized its value, establishing a base there in the early 19th century.

The town — once it declared itself a republic — has played a large and strategic role in our history. Now it symbolizes a certain wealthy testament to leisure. There are hotels, sure (most of the major chains), but a bed and breakfast might get you more into the mellow-to-the-point-of-comatose mood. There are fabulous restaurants and bars straight out of central casting, spectacular sunsets, and sailboat glides around paradise.

But don’t try too hard. Await serendipity. Just let it happen.

The secret of a successful Key West vacation is simple: Do nothing.
Know before you go: A Key West toolkit

By William McKeen

Key West is best seen by foot or bicycle. We recommend downloading the free Florida Stories walking tour app (FlStories.org), created by the Florida Humanities Council with partners around the state. The Key West tour leads you to 12 historic sites with short, painless, and intriguing history lessons.

Do your homework. Get in the mood by reading the Alex Rutledge series of mystery novels set in Key West by longtime resident Tom Corcoran (see tomcorcoran.net). Ernest Hemingway’s decade-plus in Key West produced To Have and Have Not, and Thomas McGuane’s classic 92 in the Shade shows the town as a sun-bleached hallucination. See what’s going on before your arrival by monitoring webcams from your desk (floridakeyswebcams.tv). And, of course, listen to Margaritaville Radio on Sirius XM and discover the music of John Frinzi (johnfrinzi.com) and Barry Cuda (barrycuda.com).

Here are some places to eat during your stroll through town:

Blue Heaven, 729 Thomas St., 305-296-8666. Absolutely one of the best spots for breakfast but be prepared to dodge the roosters that mingle with the diners. Known mostly for its superb food and atmosphere. Your trip is incomplete without a stop.

Pepe’s Cafe, 806 Caroline St., 305-294-7192. Hunter S. Thompson considered breakfast a holy ritual and he used to worship each morning (or, in his case, afternoon) at the altar of newspapers, eggs, grapefruit, and sausage. Go have a Gonzo breakfast. You might want to forgo Thompson’s usual four Heinekens, though.

Half Shell Raw Bar, 231 Margaret St., 305-294-7496. A great open-air bar that serves great beer, oyster po’ boys, grouper sandwiches, and raw or steamed oysters. It’s right on the dock. The slogan is “Eat it Raw,” so don’t leave until you get the official T-shirt. The Raw Bar plays great rock ‘n’ roll all the time.

Schooner Wharf Bar, 202 William St, 305-292-3302. For the hearty among you, join the Breakfast Club at Schooner Wharf. There are full breakfast menus and you can order your first beer at 7 am. You might even have to wait in line. Watch the docks awaken and smell the sea come alive. Denny’s can’t compete.

B.O.’s Fish Wagon, 801 Caroline St., 305-294-9272. Best fish sandwich on earth. Barry Cuda often plays piano blues here and B.O.’s is the closest thing Key West has to a Mississippi juke joint.

Louie’s Backyard, 700 Waddell Ave., 305-294-1061. Fine dining and a beautiful view. You don’t need to know much more. In fact, it’s hard to get a bad meal in Key West, unless you’re eating Spam from a can in the Publix parking lot.

Eventually you’re going to have to sleep. The Key West Experience is best served with a bed and breakfast, and you can find a directory at keywestbandb.com.

Here are some other places you could try:

Casa Marina, 1500 Reynolds St., 888-303-5717. This resort, now owned by Waldorf Astoria, has the vibe, the history, and the beach. After building this place, Henry Flagler died, his life complete. Casa Marina has had many incarnations over the years and was the site of a military encampment — complete with barbed wire on the beach — during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Pier House, 1 Duval St., 305-296-4600. Another fine resort — upscale, they call it, upscale! — that has some of its literary and musical history recounted in Mile Marker Zero. When Jimmy Buffett hit town in the 1970s, this is where he sang for his supper — at the Chart Room bar. Thus was history changed.

The Eden House, 1015 Fleming St., 305-296-6868. Enjoy a poolside concert by the poet laureate of the tropics, John Frinzi. The Eden House is charming and immaculate, not a whiff of ostentatiousness.
In 1905, Casimiro Hernandez Sr., began selling Cuban sandwiches and cafe con leche to the legions of his cigar-making compatriots who lived and worked nearby, but who longed for a taste of their native island, a world away.

**A story of history, family, and flavor**

The family behind Florida’s oldest restaurant, Ybor City’s The Columbia, shares memories of a century gone by — and their recipes for keeping history alive.

By Betty Cortina-Weiss  
Photos by Chris Zuppa

Her business card bears no title. Instead, the words inscribed below the name Andrea Gonzmart read simply: Fifth Generation. As in, that’s precisely how long her family has been running one of Florida’s most storied eateries — the Columbia Restaurant in Tampa’s Ybor City.

The choice of those words in particular came from the top: Andrea’s father, Richard Gonzmart, the charismatic and celebrated entrepreneur who heads the company that operates the restaurant. Richard Gonzmart designed the cards this way because “he understands that we are truly family-owned, that we don’t look at this as work but as what our family has done for generations,” says Andrea, a co-operator at the Columbia. “This is more important than a title.”

Family members reminisce about growing up in the Columbia Restaurant in a video at floridahumanities.org/blog
And just as important as history. The Columbia, the state’s oldest restaurant in continuous operation, first opened more than a century ago, in 1905, just 20 years after the founding of Ybor City, a prosperous manufacturing community built and populated almost entirely by immigrants from Cuba, Spain, and Italy.

Home to the day’s largest cigar factories, it was here that Andrea’s Cuban great-great-grandfather, Casimiro Hernandez Sr., began selling Cuban sandwiches and cafe con leche to the legions of his cigar-making compatriots who lived and worked nearby, but who longed for a taste of their native island, a world away.

By 1930, the small shop had taken over a large restaurant space next door and, in the midst of the Depression, the family
added an elegant (and air conditioned!) dining room. They named it the Don Quixote Room, and complemented a new, more elegant menu with music and dancing. By the 1950s, now in the hands of a third generation, another venue was added, this time for live musical and theatrical performances — the Siboney Room.

“I have these beautiful photos of my grandmother looking glamorous and dressed up here,” Andrea recalls. “Every Saturday evening she would come to watch the flamenco show and my grandfather would play the violin.”

Over the years, expansions continued, and today the restaurant occupies a full city block, features 15 rooms and has the capacity to seat 1,700 people at any given time.

The taste of heritage

And while it’s a bonafide Florida institution known for elegance and celebrity sightings, the true draw has always been what emerges from the kitchen. Steaming platters of golden yellow rice, generous bowls of silky black bean soup, shrimp swimming in a scrumptious aromatic garlic sauce and, of course, the legendarily crisp Cuban sandwich — real food made with real recipes passed down from generation to generation in the Gonzmart family. “We are all about honoring the past,” Andrea says. “Not reinventing it.”

As devoted to Cuban and Spanish culture and cuisine as her family is, Andrea nevertheless remembers growing up in a home with typical American flavor. “Both my mom and my dad cooked and we ate at home five or six nights a week,” she recalls. “There was a lot of beef stew and pork chops and mac-and-cheese. My mom is Italian so there was Italian food, too, and because my grandmother was Spanish there was lots of garlic and onions and olive oil. Food was definitely a big part of our life — at the restaurant and at home.”

A deep sense of reverence for heritage has helped drive the restaurant company’s growth in more ways than one. With seven Columbia’s open statewide, the Gonzmarts have recently broadened their focus. In 2014, they opened Ulele, named after a Native American princess who was one of the first to meet early Europeans, featuring a menu inspired by the state’s native ingredients. In 2016, they revived Goody Goody Burgers, the very first drive-in east of the Mississippi, which opened in Tampa in 1925; the family bought the company’s trademark recipes and its historic, iconic sign.

Now, the family is in the midst of what could be the biggest new venture yet: a Sicilian restaurant down the street from the Columbia, in a former macaroni factory. One of the city’s most anticipated openings, it promises to be an homage to Tampa’s early Italian settlers who shared the region with the Gonzmart family’s Cuban ancestors — a full circle moment in Florida food history.

“My father is working really hard to make his mark,” Andrea says, noting that there are an additional two Gonzmarts who continue to work at the company — her uncle Casey Sr. and her cousin Casey Jr. “He wants to tell Florida’s story through food, and that’s really a story of diverse cultures coming together.”
COLUMBIA CLASSICS

We’re sharing recipes for a few easy-to-make Columbia favorites that date back to the restaurant’s earliest days

SHRIMP AL AJILLO (GARLIC SHRIMP)

When TV chef Bobby Flay visited the Columbia a few years ago, he was inspired by this succulent shrimp dish — and he made his own version. A classic Spanish tapa, it packs powerful flavor and makes a perfect appetizer or main dish. Serve with crusty bread to sop up the delicious garlicky sauce.

- 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 10 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 dried, red chili peppers
- 3/4 pound of shrimp, 41-50 count per pound, peeled and deveined
- 4 ounces white wine
- 1 teaspoon Columbia Seasoning (available at shop.columbiaresaurant.com)
- 1 1/2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 teaspoons chopped parsley


COLUMBIA’S ORIGINAL 1905 SALAD

Named one of America’s Top 10 Best Salads by USA Today, this recipe was created by a waiter named Tony Noriega in the 1940s and was adapted by the Columbia, which gave it a signature dressing that features Worcestershire sauce, lemon, and Parmesan cheese.

For the salad:
- 4 cups iceberg lettuce, broken into 1 1/2-inch pieces
- 1 ripe tomato, cut into eighths
- 1/2 cup baked ham, julienned (may substitute turkey or shrimp)
- 1/2 cup Swiss cheese, julienned
- 1/2 cup pimiento-stuffed green Spanish olives
- 1905 Dressing (recipe below)
- 1/4 cup Romano cheese, grated
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- Juice of one lemon

Combine lettuce, tomato, ham, Swiss cheese and olives in a large salad bowl. Before serving, add the 1905 Dressing, Romano cheese, Worcestershire and the juice of 1 lemon. Toss well and serve immediately. Makes 2 full salads or 4 side salads.

For the dressing:
- 1/2 cup extra virgin Spanish olive oil
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- 1/8 cup white wine vinegar
- Salt and pepper to taste

Mix olive oil, garlic and oregano in a bowl with a wire whisk. Stir in vinegar, gradually beating to form an emulsion, and then season with salt and pepper. For best results, prepare 1 to 2 days in advance and refrigerate.
**PAELLA A LA VALENCIANA**

The Columbia’s signature paella — the traditional rice and seafood dish that hails from Spain — also includes pork and chicken. Don’t let the long list of ingredients intimidate you. Once they’re chopped and prepped, it’s about tossing everything into one big pot. Another tip: Splurge on saffron — a little goes a long way and it provides the dish’s key seasoning.

- 1/2 teaspoon saffron
- 4 cups chicken stock
- 1/2 pound grouper
- 1 pound boneless chicken breast
- 3/4 pound boneless pork loin
- 1/2 cup Spanish extra virgin olive oil
- 1 large Spanish onion, chopped into eighths
- 1 large green pepper, chopped into eighths
- 2 medium tomatoes, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- Columbia Seasoning
- 8 mussels
- 12 scallops (10-20-count per pound)
- 8 littleneck clams
- 3/4 pound shrimp (36-40 count per pound)
- 1/2 tablespoon salt

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<td>1 whole bay leaf</td>
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<td>2 cups white long-grain rice</td>
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<td>1/4 cup dry white wine</td>
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<tr>
<td>1/2 cup small green peas, cooked</td>
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<td>2 roasted red peppers, cut into strips</td>
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1. Using a mortar and pestle, pulverize the saffron to create a powder. In a small saucepan, heat chicken stock and add saffron, allowing saffron to dissolve. Keep warm until use.

2. Cut the grouper into 4 equal pieces. Cut the squid into 3/4-inch-wide tubes. Cut the chicken and pork into approximately 1-inch pieces.

3. In a large paella pan or large ovenproof casserole, heat 1/2 cup olive oil on stove and sauté onion, green pepper, tomatoes and garlic until onion is transparent. Add pork and chicken to the pan, season with 2 tablespoons Columbia Seasoning, and cook until meat is lightly browned on all sides.

4. Add all of the seafood and sauté for 1 minute. Add chicken stock, salt, bay leaf and rice; stir well. Bring mixture to a boil, then cover and bake in oven at 400 degrees for approximately 20 minutes or until rice is done.

5. Sprinkle with wine and garnish with peas, roasted red peppers and asparagus tips. Serves 4 to 6.

Columbia’s version of paella combines shrimp and mussels with chicken and sausage.
**FLAN**

The Columbia’s signature dessert, this is a silky custard topped with a luscious caramel — all easily made at home. Just be careful not to let the milk boil or the caramel burn.

**For the custard:**
- 1 1/4 cups whole milk
- 1 8-ounce can sweetened condensed milk
- 1 strip lemon peel (1/4-inch wide)
- 1 whole cinnamon stick
- 5 eggs
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

**Caramelized sugar (recipe below)**

1. Combine whole milk and condensed milk with lemon peel and cinnamon stick in a heavy saucepan; scald. Beat eggs and add sugar, vanilla extract, and salt in a medium-sized mixing bowl, blending well.

2. Add milk mixture gradually, straining the lemon peel and cinnamon stick. Pour into 6 4-ounce ovenproof custard cups with caramelized sugar in bottom (see below). Place cups in hot water (2 inches deep) and bake in preheated oven at 300 degrees for 40 minutes. Never let water boil or custard will be filled with holes.

3. Remove from pan and cool in refrigerator. To serve, unmold by pressing edges of custard with spoon to break away from cup, then turning upside down. Spoon caramelized sugar from bottom of cup over top of each custard. Serves 6.

**For the caramel:**
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon water

Place sugar and water in small skillet. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly until sugar is a golden brown color. Pour immediately into six 4-ounce ovenproof custard cups, approximately 1 teaspoon in each.

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**SANGRIA TINTO (RED SANGRIA)**

This classic Spanish punch is refreshing, simple to make and the perfect summer libation. Whatever you do, don’t buy a pre-made store mix. Try this easy recipe instead.

- **Sugar**
- 1 orange
- 1 lime
- 1 375-ml bottle of CR Generations Tempranillo-Cabernet Sauvignon red blend (or any other red Spanish wine)
- 1 ounce Torres brandy (or any Spanish brandy)
- Splash of lemon-lime soda
- Simple syrup
- Cherries for garnish


2. Cut orange and lime in half. Fill large pitcher with ice and combine the wine, brandy, lemon-lime soda, the juice of half of an orange, and the juice of half of a lime. Stir.

3. Add simple syrup to obtain desired sweetness. Slice remaining orange and lime into thin slices. Garnish glasses with orange slice, lime slice and cherry. Serves 4.

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The sweet and smooth consistency of flan ends many a meal at the Columbia Restaurant.
Jeff Klinkenberg: Florida’s master storyteller

Observations and insights from the chronicler of ‘Real Florida’ — winner of the 2018 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing

By Bill DeYoung

Over the course of four decades spent talking to Floridians, asking question after question, getting his feet wet to chronicle their lives and experiences for his newspaper column, everything Jeff Klinkenberg learned came down to this: Everybody has a story.

“The worm grunter, cane grinder, alligator wrestler, cattle rancher, citrus farmer and Weeki Wachee mermaid all have stories. The fisherman and the frog-gigger and the cranky woman in the roadside restaurant who makes grilled cheese sandwiches, and key lime pie to die for, with fruit right out of her back yard.

Writers and poets, amateur scientists and passionate environmentalists. Cowboys, cave divers, cooks and kooks.

“And what makes stories good, what brings them to life, are the details,” Klinkenberg always says.

Klinkenberg’s “Real Florida” columns for the St. Petersburg Times (now the Tampa Bay Times), are collected (with other works) in seven books; the latest, Son of Real Florida, was published in March.

In April, the Florida Humanities Council honored him with the 2018 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing. A five-member panel of Sunshine State literati whittled down a list of 20 candidates, and Klinkenberg was the choice as “a writer who has explored every nook and cranny of Florida in explaining the state's history and culture.”

Says bestselling novelist Carl Hiassen: “Nobody writes about the real Florida with as much insight and affection as Jeff Klinkenberg. His essays — spanning the length and breadth of this intoxicating, infuriating state — are pure gems.”

“I never knew what a folklorist was until about 25 years ago,” laughs Klinkenberg, who was also given the Florida Folk Heritage Award earlier

“I do not understand how anyone can live without some small place of enchantment to turn to,”

— Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and resident of Cross Creek, Florida

Writer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings found her muse, and her place of enchantment, under the live oaks and orange groves of her rural Cross Creek home. It was there she was inspired to write her Pulitzer Prize-winning book, The Yearling, and Cross Creek, which chronicled a life far different than she knew as a girl growing up in Washington, D.C.

Rawlings is but one in a procession of writers, stretching long before and after her, who have found fertile ground for their imagination and work of their lives amidst the complex wonder that is Florida.

In these next several pages, we explore the writing life in our state; we celebrate some of the writers — including this year’s Lifetime Achievement Award recipient and Florida Book Award winners — and delve into what motivates them and how they pursue their craft. And we are introduced to, (or in some cases, reminded of) the books that have taken root here and are making their mark far beyond our state.
this year, for his contributions to the state's cultural history. "And I thought ... I guess that's sort of what I am. I'm not a professional, I'm an amateur at it."

“But I'm interested in how people live, and the tools they use, and what they think is important, and the food they eat and all that stuff. And those things always change.”

His role model, he explains, was The New Yorker scribe John McPhee. "One of the hallmarks of his stuff was this detail. And also, he was a great idea guy."

"I loved that he wrote off the mainstream, for the most part, and would take something that most people wouldn't think is significant and dive into it. And this whole universe would appear."

Klinkenberg's witty, warm essays took Times readers into Florida's darkest — and brightest — corners. They were vicarious journeys into the heart of the state, invitations to dance with a colorful cast of characters you weren't likely to meet on the mean streets of Orlando or Fort Lauderdale.

Once a Florida boy …

Son of Real Florida carries the subtitle Stories From My Life. Although many of the chapters include material from his 38 traveling years at the Pinellas County newspaper, Klinkenberg has fashioned this one as more of a memoir.

"I lived in a house without air conditioning in Miami, and you could hear owls at night," he recalls. "When you'd get up and step outside in summer, whomp, the humidity would knock you down."

"You could be gone at 8 a.m., and not come back till 5, and your parents wouldn't worry about you. We'd be in the canal, stepping on nails and all kinds of stuff, and forget to mention it. When we were hot and sweaty and thirsty, we'd just kneel down and drink out of a mud puddle with an oil slick on top. And nothing ever happened!"

Jeff was 2 when the family left Chicago "to make a new start" in South Florida. Dad was a musician, a piano player, whose stage name was Ernie Bergen. He went where the work was and supported the family managing the kitchen at a large hotel.

Because he worked at night, he had time to spend with his son. "My dad just loved the outdoors; that was his gift," Klinkenberg says. "I grew up fishing and doing all the stuff that a lot of Florida kids did."

His natural curiosity — the thing that would lead to a career in journalism and beyond — came from Mom. "My mother had all the virtues and all the vices of the Irish," he says. "She'd go down the street with her Pall Malls and come back into the house an hour later. She'd say 'Well, let me tell you what I found out!' And she'd spin all the neighborhood gossip. It would come alive."

"So I grew up hearing a storyteller."

Interpreting Florida

He got his first job at the Miami News in 1966, a 17-year-old kid working stats on the sports desk, and by the time he left 10 years later he was a star columnist, on the Super Bowl-winning Dolphins beat.

After he'd graduated from the University of Florida, the Times brought him in as an "outdoors writer," covering tarpon tournaments and sailboat regattas, in '77. After a decade of that, he'd grown tired of the endless repetition of advancing and covering events, the "how to bait your hook" stories. At the same time, he was also writing features and getting lots of positive feedback, what he enjoyed most was finding out about people. What made them tick.

"I thought I'm going to use this beat to write profiles of interesting people who otherwise would never get covered," Klinkenberg recalls. "And they were there! It was like low-hanging fruit."

He proposed that he become a "Florida culture writer," like Al Burt of the Miami Herald, one of his heroes. "A lot of papers had
writers like that — somebody who would interpret Florida for them in a column.”

With the Times’ blessing, Klinkenberg hit the road. For the next 30 years, he was rarely in the office.

He generally turned in two “Real Florida” columns a week. “There were people at the Times taking something like two years working on a story, so I didn’t feel too bad about spending a couple weeks on one,” he says. “So I began to take a little more time on some of these pieces — and that was good for the work, really, to be able to think a little bit more about what you wanted to do.”

Ideas came from everywhere — an old longshoreman, for example, would tell him about a one-armed shrimper he’d once known, and Klinkenberg would track the man down. He spent quality time with Ricou Browning, the swimming champion who wore the rubber suit in The Creature From the Black Lagoon, with snake-milking legend Bill Haast, with the grown-up lady who’d been the original “Coppertone” girl in billboard advertisements.

Friends constantly brought him ideas and introductions, declaring that this person or that was positively “Klinkian.”

He can’t name his “favorite Floridian,” although he’s often asked. Every story was as interesting to him as the one before, and the one after.

He tends to remember with fondness the real “characters,” with one-of-a-kind stories. Like Nathan Martin, the unschooled, shoeless Gilchrist County forest dweller who’d read every book in the local library; or the mysterious, chain-smoking, 7-foot-tall mullet gigger who haunted the St. Petersburg pier for decades, at night. Or the legendary cheesecake photographer Bunny Yeager. Or the guy who makes a living by diving for golf balls in South Florida waters, alligators be damned.

Then, of course, there are the stories he discovers at the intersection of Serendipity, Coincidence, and Dumb Luck. “I’d look at a map, for example, and notice that part of Florida was in the Central time zone,” he says. “West of the Apalachicola River. I’d think well, what’s that like if you live right on that line there? I’d think well, what’s that like if you live right on that line there? So I’d go up there and spend a day or so on both sides of the line.”

Heading home, “I stop in East Point, this tiny town, to put gas in my car. I see a sticker on the pump — it’s a picture of this scary looking highway patrolman, and he’s saying ‘If you steal gas, you will lose your license.’ For years, those stickers were everywhere, like 80,000 pumps in Florida.”

Nothing could have prepared Klinkenberg for what happened next. “This car pulls up at the other pump, and I don’t know why, but I looked … and it was him. It was the guy on the sticker! I always thought he’s just an actor, right? They had to go to Central Casting to find that guy.”

Trooper Anthony Stone, out of Tallahassee, noticed Klinkenberg staring. “Yes, it’s me,” he said to the flabbergasted reporter. What were the odds?


At 68, Klinkenberg still doesn’t see himself as a preservationist, recording the thoughts and deeds of a dying culture for posterity’s sake. He says he’ll probably never run out of questions.

He does, however, bristle when someone — usually a stranger — asks him about the contemporary “Florida Man” phenomenon, tied to news articles about bizarre and/or humorous events in the state he loves so much.

“I’ve come to sort of resent the Florida Man as a buffoon,” he says. “As the laughingstock for the nation. One, it distracts from some more important things about Florida, some terrifying things. "There are too many of us here … our water supply is threatened … the springs have started clouding up … but wait a minute — what about that guy who was naked?"

While he ponders these issues, he travels with his wife, Susan King, and obsesses over historic Florida art (the couple has an impressive collection of original Highwayman paintings). They recently returned from Tuscany where they attended the wedding of his daughter Kate (he has three adult children).

Klinkenberg continues to read voraciously about Florida and to accept freelance assignments, if it’s something he’s curious about.

While he ponders these issues, he travels with his wife, Susan King, and obsesses over historic Florida art (the couple has an impressive collection of original Highwayman paintings). They recently returned from Tuscany where they attended the wedding of his daughter Kate (he has three adult children).

Klinkenberg continues to read voraciously about Florida and to accept freelance assignments, if it’s something he’s curious about. “Writers never retire,” he laughs. “You never stop thinking about it. Even if you don’t do it, you never stop thinking ‘That’s interesting. If I were still writing, this is what I’d do.’ So I’m thinking like that all the time.”

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**A “son of Florida” book list**

We asked Jeff Klinkenberg for a list of books that all true Floridians should read.

Here’s what he recommended:

**Travels**, William Bartram, 1791

**Palmetto Leaves**, Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1873

**Their Eyes Were Watching God**, Zora Neale Hurston, 1937

**The Yearling**, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, 1938

**The WPA Guide to Florida**, edited by Stetson Kennedy (among others), 1939

**Palmetto Country**, Stetson Kennedy, 1942

**The Lion’s Paw**, Robb White, 1946

**Everglades: River of Grass**, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, 1947

**The Deep Blue Goodbye**, John D. MacDonald, 1964

**Oranges**, John McPhee, 1966

**Ninety-Two in the Shade**, Thomas McGuane, 1972

**Condominium**, John D. MacDonald, 1977

**A Land Remembered**, Patrick D. Smith, 1984

**Tourist Season**, Carl Hiaasen, 1987

**The Man Who Invented Florida**, Randy Wayne White, 1993

**Florida: a Short History**, Michael Gannon, 1993

**A Naturalist in Florida**, Archie Carr, 1994

**Anna in the Tropics**, Nilo Cruz, 2002

**Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams**, Gary Mormino, 2005

**Shadow Country**, Peter Matthiessen, 2008

**Devil in the Grove**, Peter Matthiessen, 2008

**The Gulf**, Jack E. Davis, 2017
Everything about the Everglades feels too big for comfort. Our alligators can reach 14 feet and I’ve seen orchids bigger than my head, which is about the size of a pumpkin. My two closest Everglades pals each weigh 285 pounds. When they hike into a swamp, they sink. Even our mud is intimidating.

But the Ochopee Post Office in the Everglades is the smallest in the United States. The building, 8 feet 4 inches deep and about 7 feet wide, once was a shed to store tools and tomatoes. Now it’s a full-fledged post office with room for only a single clerk. It has 40 P.O. boxes and sends a carrier out six days a week on a 170-mile route to serve 300 patrons who dwell mostly in the middle of nowhere.

You’ll find the post office about 65 miles west of Miami or 35 miles east of Naples on U.S. 41, also known as the Tamiami Trail. Be alert, the tiny post office is easy to miss.

I always stop for a chat with whoever happens to on duty behind the counter. I still blush when I remember the time a postal clerk chewed me out for boldly asking about her toilet habits. Well, my inquiring mind had noticed the lack of plumbing. Turns out the nearest comfort station is three miles away, although those tempting but ominous Everglades bushes are just out back.

Snakes make the job of Everglades postal employee a tad exciting. Last time I visited, clerk Brenda Brown was recovering from her most recent trauma. She had been working at her desk when she noticed something uninvited moving only inches from her hand.

“There was not enough room inside the post office for the two of us,” was Brenda’s explanation as to why she fled from the harmless rat snake into the parking lot. Still, it could have been worse. A colleague, Shannon Mitchell, recently was repairing a broken postal scale when she found a second rat snake gumming up the works.

“One thing you worry about is how the snakes get inside in the first place,” Brenda once told me, automatically glancing at her feet. “Kind of nerve-wracking.”

For the record, she has yet to encounter the bear that wanders the property after dark with impunity. Nor has she exchanged glances with the Florida panther, the Everglades’ version of a mountain lion, known to lurk in the vicinity. Alligators, on the other hand, are as common as cabbage palms. In the winter, they often sunbathe in the post office parking lot. There is no lobby, so you’ll want to wait in your car until the gator is gone.

During winter, the nation’s smallest post office is a tourist attraction. Folks line up at the window for postcards bearing the coveted Ochopee 34141 ZIP code. Please be patient should a flustered postal clerk suddenly bolt through the door past you. A bathroom break may be in the offing. It may also mean a snake just slithered across her feet.

— From Son of Real Florida, University Press of Florida
The Writer’s Life

Just where do the spark and the desire come from? Eight Florida Book Award winners describe how, day by day, they bring words to life — and offer wise counsel to those who would like to do the same

By Bill DeYoung

Since the printed word first appeared to engage and captivate, a single, nagging question has hung in the air, begging for one satisfactory answer: Why do writers write?

Is it a compulsion? A childhood dream fulfilled? An itch that must be scratched?

According to these 2018 Florida Book Award winners, it’s all that and more.

Just as each book has its own genre, its own style and subject, so too does each writer declare his or her own unique motivation. There is no master set of rules, no skeleton key that opens the door of creativity.

We talk to novelists Laura Lee Smith (The Ice House), Patricia Gussin (Come Home) and Elizabeth Sims (Crimes in a Second Language), nonfiction authors Edwidge Danticat (The Art of Death) and Arlo Haskell (Jews of Key West), poet Terry Ann Thaxton (Mud Song), chef Norman Van Aken (Norman Van Aken’s Florida Kitchen) and young adult novelist Jenny Torres Sanchez (Because of the Sun).

Only Danticat and Sanchez are full-time writers. Thaxton teaches creative writing at the University of Central Florida; Haskell is a publisher and executive director of the Key West Literary Seminar; Sims is a writing coach, and a contributing editor to Writer’s Digest; Gussin (a former physician) owns Oceanview Publishing; Van Aken is a James Beard Award-winning chef and owner of acclaimed restaurants in Orlando, Mount Dora, and Miami; Smith is a copywriter for the Steinway & Sons piano company.

How (and why) did you become a writer?

Smith: “When I first started writing, I didn't think I would become a published author. I was doing it just to entertain myself, and have fun with it. I enjoyed it. I almost crave those early days again, because now I feel there’s an expectation to do it again.”

Van Aken: “When I was 8 years old, and people asked me what I wanted to be, I would say a writer. I didn’t know about cooking. I wasn’t the son of a famous chef or anything. And they would say ‘That’s cute … but what are you really going to do?’”

Danticat: “I was told a lot of stories when I was a girl in Haiti. I knew I wanted to tell stories in some way, but I was very shy and the oral performance element of storytelling was very intimidating to me. I was given my first book by my uncle when I was 4 — the children’s book Madeleine. This book made me aware of this other intimate way of telling stories. I had no idea how I would do it, but reading that book I decided that I wanted to tell stories in the same way, that I wanted to be a writer.”
Torres Sanchez: “I don’t remember thinking I would just write for a young adult audience. It just happened over time. I worked as a high school teacher, so I think being around them, and hearing their stories — how the world looks through the eyes of a teenager — really kind of inspired me to write for that audience.”

Thaxton: “I always wanted to be a teacher, but when I was in sixth grade, I wrote an article about Arbor Day that was published on the Sarasota Herald-Tribune’s kids page. So I’ve always written — but did I think I was going to grow up and be a writer? Hmm. I’m still waiting for that to happen.”

Describe your “process” for working on your FBA-winning book. What was the biggest challenge, what kind of preparation did it take?

Gussin: “I always start with the character in a certain place. In this case, it was Nicole and her husband Ahmed, when he decided to abduct their child to Egypt. That’s certainly a very terrifying situation in terms of a family. My husband and I had been traveling in Egypt just before the Arab Spring, so I had a lot of personal insight into what was happening in Egypt. And I had to do a lot of research on Arab Spring, and a lot of research on parental abductions.”

Danticat: “When my mother died, I knew I wanted to write about her death in some way. It was hard to imagine writing something else before I considered the experience of her dying and my mourning her. I had written some short pieces about her over the years that I began to look over again with her death in mind. I was also reading some books for comfort, books some friends had given me, books in which writers wrestle with death. All these elements came together, along with some new material I wrote to keep close to me and in my mind the final days of my mother’s life.”

Thaxton: “I never know what the next poem is going to be about, so I don’t have an outline for a book, I don’t predetermine. When I have several of them, then I start seeing the thread of connection — how they’re all going to fit together.”

Smith: “With The Ice House, and with all of my fiction, I always begin with a character. If you’ve done your due diligence in creating the character, you’re going to know how that person will react to a fork in the road. It’s fun — you just give them choices and let them find their way.”

Haskell: “In this case, my first nonfiction book, I was studying an ever-expanding set of documents and verbal facts, trying to understand what had happened — especially the things that hadn’t been talked about in many years. What made it fun was doing the research, and digging into it and seeing what I could find.”

Longboat Key resident Patricia Gussin’s thriller Come Home took the FBA gold medal in popular fiction.

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Did you have a writing discipline, i.e. “Up at 4 a.m. every day, brew the coffee, get to work”? 

Torres Sanchez: “During the school year, when my kids take off to school, I go to a coffee shop close by. I order an Americano and I sit down, and I write for a good three or four hours. That’s Monday through Friday — on the weekends, if I can write anything, it’s a plus.”

Smith: “I am definitely an early riser. Because I do have a day job, and a family and a dog and all those things. So once 9 o’clock rolls around and the rest of the world is busy and sending me emails and things like that, I can’t get a lot of concentration time in for my fiction. So I actually do get up early. Keurig is my friend!”

Haskell: “When I started working on The Jews of Key West, it was mostly weekends. I would work on it for these long, marathon stints, 12 or 14 hours in a sitting, and get big chunks of it done. The last few years it was in much smaller increments, after my daughter went to bed in the evening. So I worked around a toddler’s sleep schedule! What I found was best was doing it regularly — even if it’s only 30 minutes a day, if you can tune into it every day it goes a lot better. Just write one sentence and you’ll feel better about it.”

Gussin: “I write whenever I can find a three-hour window of uninterrupted time. I’m always looking for that three hours, and when I find it I’ll sit down wherever I am and just give it my total concentration. When that can happen day after day, that’s wonderful. But sometimes it doesn’t.”

Thaxton: “I choose not to get up at 4 a.m., make coffee and write! I do write every week, and usually I go to a coffee shop and write — because even though I’m an introvert, I like the noise around me for some reason.”

Van Aken: “I like to write in the mornings, before the world gets to me. With the cookbooks, around 6-6:30, and I try to write for at least two hours before I even think about getting into the recipe testing mode, the research mode.”

The FBA gold medal for general fiction went to St. Augustine’s Laura Lee Smith, for The Ice House.

Norman Van Aken’s Florida Kitchen brought the Orlando celebrity chef the gold medal in the cooking category.
Danticat: “I have young children so I basically write around their lives and their schedules and the schedule of my teaching or traveling. What I do find most valuable in writing is having a stretch of time where I am at home living my usual life in a usual way, the kind of time that seems uninterrupted, to finish something. It’s hard for me to start something if I don’t see how I’m going to finish it, whether that time is a whole day, a week, or a month. I like to feel like I can get back to it whenever I want and increasingly, given my children and other obligations, that is more and more of a luxury.”

What’s your best piece of practical advice for writing a book?

Haskell: “From a researching or nonfiction perspective, I would say trust your instincts. Trust the path you’re on. But always double-check your work! As a writer, just keep putting in the time — keep looking at it, as often as you can. That’s the most important takeaway.”

Smith: “Focus on developing a love of writing, and don’t worry about publication, don’t worry about having written ... if you don’t really love the act of sitting in the chair and playing with words, I would almost recommend you go find a different hobby.”

Sims: “The most key thing to start out with, when you’re looking at that blank page, is forget perfectionism. Be OK with crappy output, because that’s the only way you’re going to get any output at first. The only way to guarantee that your book won’t be successful is to not write it.”

Danticat: “Just write it. Why not? Just give it a try. In The Art of Death, I write about a Don DeLillo character, who also happens to be a writer. Bill Gray tells us via Don DeLillo, “Do you know why I believe in the novel? It is a democratic shout. Anybody can write a great novel, one great novel, almost any amateur off the street ... some nameless drudge, some desperado with a nurtured dream can sit down and find his voice and luck out and do it.” I also believe that. It’s not going to be a novel for everyone. It might be something else, but you won’t know unless you try.”

Thaxton: “Read! I’m surprised at how little even my students read, and I teach only creative writing majors. My goal as a teacher is to find books for them that they will be inspired by.”

Van Aken: “I think you should start reading when you’re about 6 years old. And read and read and read and read. That was fortunately what my life was — I fell in love with reading. It was my escape hatch to the world.”

Torres Sanchez: “Just write, because that is the most difficult part. It’s the only part that we have any control over, and it’s the most important part. Nothing beats just getting in the chair and facing it every day. And sitting down and writing.”

Novelist and writing coach Elizabeth Sims, based in Bradenton, won the Florida Book Award general fiction silver for Crimes in a Second Language.
We’d like to introduce you to some of Florida’s best writers — the winners of this year’s Florida Book Awards competition — who share stories behind their books.

The work of these 27 authors, selected from more than 200 nominations across 11 categories, includes mystery, adventure, gourmet cooking, poetry, biography, and more. The awards are coordinated by Florida State University libraries. Judges are librarians from around the state, other authors, educators, and professionals in such fields as cooking. The Book Awards competition began in 2006. There are 13 co-sponsors that help with the competition and awards, including the Florida Humanities Council. For information about the awards, visit floridabookawards.lib.fsu.edu.

YOUNGER CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

Rob Sanders

Rodzilla

Gold Medal Award for Younger Children’s Literature

An elementary school teacher, Rob Sanders grew up in Springfield, Missouri, where he helped raise chickens, harvest pumpkins, and pick the fruit from apple and peach trees. His enthusiastic students encouraged him to pursue his dream of writing picture books.

The Brandon resident has produced nine books for younger children, including one that came out in April, The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag.

“I wrote the first draft of the (Harvey Milk) manuscript the night of the SCOTUS decision for marriage equality,” Sanders tells FORUM. “Originally, I thought of this book as a celebration of victories won. But in more recent years, it’s become obvious that the message of pride, hope, love, and equality is one that needs to be taught over and over again. I’m excited for children of all ages to learn this history and feel this pride.”

Rodzilla tells a rollicking story about a soft, squishy monster that heads for the city to wreak havoc. Oh, but wait! Is it a monster or a toddler who runs amok? Only the parents know for sure.

Carrie Clickard

Dumpling Dreams

Silver Medal, Younger Children’s Literature

Dumpling Dreams tells the story, in verse, of chef Joyce Chen, who is credited with popularizing Chinese food in the northeastern United States.

Chen’s eventful life includes years of fleeing war in China, immigration to America, writing cookbooks, opening restaurants, and starring in her own television show.

Though written for younger readers, Dumpling Dreams provides a quick study about Chen, which will interest many adults. The book contains a timeline of Chen’s life, a glossary of terms used in Chinese cuisine, and a recipe for — what else? — dumplings. Katy Wu illustrated.

“I’m a born book omnivore and haunted the library at the end of my street from my earliest days,” Clickard says. “Once I fell into the wondrous illustrated world hiding on those bottom two bookshelves, I never wanted to leave.”

Clickard has worked as a copywriter, pressroom manager, marketing VP, and color guard instructor. She credits her career success to a firm belief that dragons exist and that competitive baton twirling should be an Olympic sport.

She lives in Gainesville and likes to tour the world with family, friends, and her 4-pound poodle, Pandora.
Marianne Berkes  
Baby on Board: How Animals Carry Their Young  
Bronze Medal, Younger Children’s Literature

Marianne Berkes loves nature and she pours it into her books. For example, frogs are a big deal. They provided the inspiration for her first book 20 years ago. “I write about things that interest me,” Berkes says in her blog. “And I love to do the research ... I have always been fascinated with frogs, and when I moved to Florida, I couldn’t believe the variety of sounds that came from the pond in the back of our home. I recorded them. Then, of course, I needed to find out which frog was making which sound.”

Baby on Board brings mamas and their young to life — from the cute kangaroo to the rough-and-tough alligator. There’s even a wolf spider carrying hundreds of babies on her back. Cathy Morrison illustrated.

Berkes has written more than 20 books for children, all about some aspect of the natural world. “I so want kids to get out and experience nature,” she said at the Florida Book Awards banquet this year. In 2013, she was a Florida Book Awards bronze winner. She lives in Orange City.

OLDER CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

Ed Masessa  
Wandmaker’s Apprentice  
Gold Medal, Older Children’s Literature

Ed Masessa says he has been a child all his life, subscribing to the philosophy that growing old is mandatory, growing up is optional. He has worked a succession of eclectic jobs — grease monkey, office cleaner, fast food manager, forklift operator, warehouse supervisor, sales rep, and purchasing manager for Mack Trucks and Alfa Romeo. He eventually joined Scholastic Book Fairs, which puts on literacy events at schools.

“I’ve always thought of myself as the poster child for career change,” Masessa said at the Florida Book Awards banquet. In Wandmaker’s Apprentice, a Harry Potteresque story, the famously reclusive Wandmaster has invited a new generation of wandmakers to learn the craft’s secrets. Naturally, danger fills every corner, along with magic, curses, and fantastic beasts.

He gets his ideas from many sources. “Sometimes I just see a picture and it gives me the idea for a title of a book, and I kind of back into the book at that point,” he told The Bookworm Twins, Florida middle-school brothers who review books and interview authors on their website.

Masessa was reared in New Jersey and moved in 1989 to Oviedo.

R.M. Romero  
The Dollmaker of Krakow  
Silver Medal, Older Children’s Literature

“There once was a little doll named Karolina ... It was in the woods that she met a toy soldier named Fritz, and together with the help of a kind wind, Dogoda, she found she was destined to return to the human world.”

So it is written in The Dollmaker of Krakow, which flows with magic, folklore, fantasy, and history. The story is set during World War II and deals with the Nazi occupation of Warsaw and the coming of the Holocaust.

Romero says her protagonist, Karolina, showed up in her imagination almost fully formed. “Her spirited nature was apparent right away,” Romero told Writers and Artists, an online media guide for authors.

Instrumental music, played while she wrote, helped her writing process. Among her favorites was Danny Elfman, who composed The Simpsons Theme and the music for such productions as the movie Edward Scissorhands.

Romero lives in Miami Beach with a cat she describes on her website as “witchy.”

Rodman Philbrick  
Who Killed Darius Drake?  
Bronze Medal, Older Children’s Literature

Rodman Philbrick began writing novels at age 16, and for many years wrote mysteries and suspense novels for adults. In 1993, Brothers and Sinners won the Shamus Award, given by the Private Eye Writers of America for the best detective fiction of the year.

The same year, Philbrick began writing fiction for younger readers. His debut
novel, *Freak the Mighty*, was made into a movie starring Sharon Stone and James Gandolfini.

That book included an interview with Philbrick: “The first story I remember writing was a five-page, trick-ending thing called *The President’s Barber*.”

In Philbrick’s bronze medal novel, genius orphan Darius employs the school tough kid to help him find out who sent a note asking, “Who Killed Darius Drake?” (Thus the title.) Meanwhile, Darius’ grandfather goes to prison for forging evidence in the mystery of a missing diamond necklace. Searches and lots of trouble follow.

Philbrick divides his time between Maine and Florida.

**COOKING**

**Norman Van Aken**

*Norman Van Aken’s Florida Kitchen*

**Gold Medal, Cooking**

Norman Van Aken might well be the food king of Florida — and beyond.

He has been honored at Spain’s International Summit of Gastronomy as a founding father of New World Cuisine, a celebration of Latin, Caribbean, Asian, African, and American flavors. He also is known internationally for introducing the concept of “fusion” to the culinary world — combining food traditions.

Van Aken is connected with several restaurants around Florida, including the eponymous *Norman’s* in Orlando.

“If a map of the world were a tablecloth, and I could choose a place at that table, I would sit at the southern tip of Florida, at the nexus of North America and the Caribbean. My plate would touch Cuba, the Florida Keys, the Yucatan, the West Indies, the Bahamas, and South America,” Von Aken says on the restaurant’s website.

Von Aken is the only Floridian inducted into the prestigious James Beard list of “Who’s Who in American Food and Beverage.” He lives in Miami.

To read excerpts from some of the Florida Book Award-winning books, please visit floridahumanities.org/blog.

**FLORIDA NONFICTION**

**Arlo Haskell**

*The Jews of Key West*  
**Gold Medal and Phillip and Dana Zimmerman Gold Medal Prize for Florida Nonfiction**

The Jewish history in Key West dates to 1823, but until Arlo Haskell’s book, many of the old stories were lost. *The Jews of Key West* includes the cigar makers of the 1860s and the influx of peddlers during the 1880s.

But the most dramatic story speaks to the 1920s’ immigration hysteria, when Key West’s Jews resisted quotas. They established the southern American terminal of the Jewish underground, smuggling Jewish people from other countries in small boats across the Florida Straits to safety in Key West.

Haskell relished researching a smaller group of people, which gave him a chance to look at a culture through a different lens. He was able to use declassified files from the United States Department of State.

“History is often written from the perspective of those in power,” he said at this year’s Florida Book Awards dinner.

He is executive director of the Key West Literary Seminar, responsible for organizing one of the country’s preeminent literary conferences.

Born and raised in the Florida Keys, Haskell lives in Key West with his wife, Ashley, and their 2-year-old daughter, Aviva.

**Frank Cassell**

*Suncoast Empire*  
**Silver Medal, Florida Nonfiction**

*Suncoast Empire* relates the life of Sarasota’s “society queen” of the early 20th century, Bertha Honore Palmer. Palmer was one of the most widely known and wealthiest women in America.

Cassell says one reason he wrote the book was that existing historical literature did not fully convey how Palmer and her family transformed what became Sarasota County and therefore the future possibilities of the area.

“On a more personal level, this book is for my mother, who died at age 88 shortly before *Suncoast Empire* was published,” Cassell tells FORUM.
“As far back as the 1980s she persuaded me to stop writing about early American political and military history and join her in studying the Columbian Exposition and Bertha Palmer, her personal heroine.”

A former college professor and administrator, Cassell retired and moved to Sarasota with his wife, Beth, in 2007. He serves as a member of the Sarasota County Historical Commission and as chair of the History and Preservation Coalition of Sarasota County.

Julio Capó Jr.

Welcome to Fairyland
Bronze Medal, Florida Nonfiction

Welcome to Fairyland documents the world of Miami’s old saloons, brothels, nightclubs, bars, and cruising spots. As its subtitle states, the book is history of queer Miami before 1940.

Julio Capó Jr. has drawn from a vast archive in finding the mostly forgotten history of fairyland, originally a marketing term that carried many definitions for various groups.

“I sought ... to recover the queer voices, especially from people of color who were even more aggressively erased from our sense of the past, of those who came before us and lived both ordinary and extraordinary lives,” Capó tells FORUM.

A Miami native, Capó is an assistant professor in the history department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Welcome to Fairyland is his first book. He is currently writing about the 2016 Pulse nightclub massacre as a window on the long history of violence toward and displacement and erasure of Latino and Latinx communities.

Capó is co-chair of the Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History, which is an affiliate of the American Historical Association.

GENERAL NONFICTION

Laura Lee Smith

The Ice House
Gold Medal, General Fiction

A sense of place always drives Laura Lee Smith’s writing. She says that place becomes almost like a character in any story she has written.

In The Ice House, the sense-of-place theme contrasts steamy northeast Florida and cold, rugged Scotland. The tension between the two places mirrors the strain between an estranged father and son.

“Playing with the contrast between these two locales was one of the things I think I enjoyed most about writing the story,” Smith says. “It’s a book about atonement and forgiveness and regret, but mostly, I think, it’s a book about a family who loves each other, even when they don’t want to.”

It is Smith’s second Florida Book Awards medal. She won silver in the 2014 awards with Heart of Palm, another story praised for its incisive, powerful characters.

Smith is also a writer of short fiction. Her work has been published in New Stories from the South: The Year’s Best, 2010; The Florida Review, Natural Bridge, Bayou, and other journals.

She lives in St. Augustine.

Elizabeth Sims

Crimes in a Second Language
Silver Medal, General Fiction

As so many successful fiction authors seem to have done, Elizabeth Sims heard and read many stories as a child — from the tall tales her father told to books like Grimm’s Fairy Tales that her mother, a teacher, brought home.

Sims has held numerous jobs: photographer, technical writer, bookseller, street busker, ranch hand, corporate executive, lifeguard, college writing teacher, symphonic percussionist, and reporter.

She has written two mystery series, in addition to short stories and this winning book, Crimes in a Second Language. In it, Elnice Coker and her husband, Arthur, are retired teachers who move to California. Elnice befriends a younger Mexican-American housekeeper. Questions of friendship, industrial espionage, and the intrigue of the film business arise.

“I’ve always had a morbid curiosity about unusual crimes, from the JFK assassination to the Manson murders to the two Teds (Bundy and Kaczynski) to O.J., on and on,” Sims writes in a recent blog. “This fits into my obsession with why do people do what they do? Which fits into my obsession with writing with as much truth and authenticity as possible.”

Sims lives in Bradenton.
Randy Wayne White
*Mangrove Lightning*
*Bronze Medal, General Fiction*

A three-time Florida Book Award medalist, Randy Wayne White has led a life that seems tailored for a thriller/adventure writer.

Since leaving home at age 16 and skipping college, he has been a farm hand, a brass- and iron-foundry worker, a telephone lineman, and, for 13 years, a full-time fishing guide on Florida’s Sanibel Island.

White says he has been stabbed, “shot at with intent,” and was in a hotel that got blown up by Shining Path guerrillas in Peru.

He also has rescued refugees from Cuba, piloting a 55-foot boat in stormy seas from Mariel to Key West, with 147 people packed aboard.

“When we reached Key West, all 147 began chanting ‘Libertad!’ It was a very powerful experience,” White told *Huffington Post.*

In *Mangrove Lightning,* the ghosts of a 1925 multiple murder stalk White’s beloved Doc Ford, who must deal with a curse and the mind of a madman.

White lives on Sanibel Island.

**Edwidge Danticat**

*The Art of Death*
*Gold Medal, General Nonfiction*

Edwidge Danticat is a much-decorated writer whose successes include a previous Florida Book Awards medal. This medalist book, *The Art of Death,* was also a finalist in this year’s National Book Critics awards.

The book is both a personal account of Danticat’s mother dying from cancer and an analysis of the ways that other authors have written about dying.

“Writing has been the primary way I have tried to make sense of my losses,” Danticat says in the book’s introduction. “I have been writing about death for as long as I have been writing.”

Her memoir, *Brother, I’m Dying,* was a 2007 finalist for the National Book Award and a 2008 winner of the National Book Critics award for autobiography.

In this 50th year since Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, Danticat wrote an essay titled “Dangerous Unselfishness.” She challenges readers to find the courage to be Good Samaritans. The essay is on the website of Plough, a nonprofit publisher specializing in books about faith, society, and culture.

Born in Port au Prince, Haiti, Danticat lives in Miami.

**D. Bruce Means**

*Diamonds in the Rough*
*Silver Medal, General Nonfiction*

Alaska has its moose. The northern Rockies have grizzly bears. And north Florida and south Georgia claim the eastern diamondback rattlesnake as their iconic creature.

Means arrived in Tallahassee to attend Florida State University in 1961. A salamander specialist, he nonetheless cultivated an acquaintance with snakes, and especially *Crotalus adamanteus* — the eastern diamondback.

In producing *Diamonds in the Rough,* a definitive study of the snake, Means dissected 776 carcasses, conducted field studies for 38 years, and read all available diamondback literature. He has tracked the snakes with transmitters. He received a life-threatening bite in 1993.

He is a scientist with a literary touch. In school, he said at this year’s Florida Book Awards dinner, “I was a jock. But I loved English. I loved writing.” (See Means’ essay on his favorite teacher in this issue.)

Means is a research ecologist and adjunct professor of biology at FSU. He lives in Tallahassee.

**Kristine Harper**

*Make it Rain: State Control of the Atmosphere in Twentieth-Century America*
*Bronze Medal, General Nonfiction*

Cloud seeding. Storm prevention. Changing the course of a hurricane. Bold manipulators have tried these activities, hoping to make the weather bow to human will. For the most part, no dice.

**The University of Chicago Press** describes Kristine Harper’s *Make it Rain* as a tale of “the somewhat ludicrous history of state-funded attempts to manage, manipulate, and deploy the weather in America.”

Speaking at the Florida Book Awards dinner, Harper, said she was...
originally a math major. “I am an accidental writer. Her interests are varied. A history professor at Florida State University, she writes extensively about the history of the physical environmental sciences. She lives in Tallahassee.

POETRY

Kaveh Akbar

Calling a Wolf a Wolf
Gold Medal, Poetry

Calling a Wolf a Wolf takes on the fearful wilderness of addiction and recovery, and Kaveh Akbar’s own journey toward sobriety. His struggle generated the book and a website called DiveDapper, which features interviews with major modern poets. “The oldest recognizable poem in my book ranges back to when I got sober,” Akbar told NPR. “I suddenly had 16 hours a day to fill with something new. My entire life up to that point was predicated on the pursuit of this or that narcotic experience. When that was uplifted, I had to find something else.”

Calling a Wolf a Wolf is Akbar’s debut collection. His website is named after a duck-like bird to which Shakespeare compared Adonis, writing, “Upon this promise did he raise his chin, / Like a dive-dapper peering through a wave / Who, being look’d on, ducks as quickly in.”

Akbar was born in Tehran, Iran, and lives in Tallahassee.

Terry Ann Thaxton

Mud Song
Silver Medal, Poetry

When she was a 20-something, Terry Ann Thaxton wondered why she wasn’t in college, because as a girl, other than the woods, school was her favorite place. But her father would not pay for her to attend, she says, because she was a girl.

At age 29, she started college on her own, earning a bachelor’s and two master’s degrees.

The fifth-generation Floridian has published two other books of poetry, including one that won a Florida Book Awards bronze medal in 2013. This year’s medalist, Mud Song, filled with verse about Florida and its people, also won the 2017 T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry. Thaxton calls it a “love song” to Florida. “I love Florida. I love its people, its flora and fauna, its funk, its collage of people and architecture,” Thaxton tells FORUM.

“I love that Florida is not one single identity.” She teaches English and creative writing at the University of Central Florida, where she is director of the master of fine arts program. She lives near Orlando with her husband, writer Don Stap, and their coonhound/lab mix, Sky.

Michael Hettich

The Frozen Harbor
Bronze Medal, Poetry

Michael Hettich began writing poetry in 1973 when, as the quiet kid in the back row of his first writing workshop, he discovered what then felt like magic: a language that gave him power to transform his world.”

Speaking at the Florida Book Awards dinner, Hettich said The Frozen Harbor “existed in its nonexistence. It was a lot of forgotten poems that hadn’t been published.”

Hettich has published more than a dozen books and chapbooks of poetry. His work has appeared widely in journals and anthologies.

He has won three Florida Individual Artists fellowships. His Systems of Vanishing won the 2013 Tampa Review Prize for Poetry. The Measured Breathing took the 2011 Swan Scythe Press Award. Flock and Shadow was selected as a national Book Sense Spring 2006 Top Ten Poetry Book and he received the Tales Prize for Swimmer Dreams in 2005.

Hettich and his wife, Colleen, taught at Miami Dade College. They are retiring this year and moving to Asheville, North Carolina. They have two adult children, Matthew and Caitlin.

POPULAR FICTION

Patricia Gussin

Come Home
Gold Medal, Popular Fiction

Patricia Gussin, who also took Florida Book Awards gold in 2015, is a board-certified family medicine physician. She has spent the major part of her career as research vice president in a healthcare company.

In her spare time, she writes medical thrillers; Come Home is her seventh novel. It tells the story of Nicole Nelson and Ahmed Masud, a dynamic, highly
successful Philadelphia couple who are partners in a plastic surgery practice. The couple has a son whom they adore. But lingering post-9/11 prejudice cracks their fairy tale life. An abduction and tragic consequences await.

Gussin says her most sympathetic character is Ahmed, the husband. “What he does is heinous, but he is so conflicted and so torn by his Egyptian family and his American family. In the end, he is full of regret, but he can’t reverse the outcome,” she says on her website.

Gussin and her husband, Robert, own two vineyards in Marlborough on the south island of New Zealand. The couple splits time among Longboat Key, East Hampton, New York, and New Zealand.

Robert Macomber

An Honorable War
Silver Medal, Popular Fiction

Robert Macomber comes naturally to maritime fiction. He grew up on Florida’s southwest coast, where he was an offshore racing skipper by age 17. He has competed in Florida, Mexico, and the Bahamas for 32 years.

A lecturer who has spoken around the world as visiting author on cruise ships, Macomber has been a U.S. Department of Defense consultant, specializing in strategic planning using historical analogies to demonstrate solutions to military problems.

An Honorable War portrays the beginning of the Spanish-American War.

“Most in America thought the war would be a cakewalk,” Macomber told the Fort Myers News-Press. “The Cubans knew the terrain and the conditions. Our navy knew it’d be difficult; our army was ill prepared. It was chaotic in mobilizing, especially in Tampa and Jacksonville. I want people to know what happened.”

It is the 13th book in Macomber’s “honor” series, which follows the career and personal life of naval officer Peter Wake. Macomber and Wake have a huge following, with many of the author’s fans calling themselves “Wakians.”

The author lives on Pine Island, where he grew up.
like in Buenos Aires, New York, or Barcelona,” he told El Nuevo Herald.

A native of Peru, León studied literature and sociology at Florida International University. In Peru, he studied political science and law at the University of Lima.

**Carlos García Pandiello**

*Jaspora*

*Silver Medal, Spanish Language*

The title **Jaspora** was taken from a song by rapper Wyclef Jean that refers to the Haitian diaspora. Carlos García Pandiello’s first novel actually integrates several aspects of diverse Miami: the Cuban influence, the Haitian neighborhoods, African American culture, rap, gospel music, and evangelical sermons. Meanwhile, Pandiello uses baseball as background and metaphor.

**Jaspora** tells the story of Ramón González, a former Cuban-American baseball player haunted by two traumatic experiences: the death of his wife and the injury that cost him his sports career.

“One of the main themes of my novel is the American obsession with triumph, and I thought that no other character would embody those obsessions better than an athlete,” Pandiello tells FORUM. “Besides that, I always wanted to write a story about a baseball player — a slugger who stopped hitting homers; a pitcher who stopped throwing strikes.”

Pandiello is an essayist and screenwriter who writes for the Telemundo network and El Nuevo Herald. He has a master’s degree in Hispanic American Literature from Florida International. He lives in Miami.

**VISUAL ARTS**

**Jared Beck and Pamela Miner**

*River and Road*

*Gold Medal and Richard E. Rice Gold Medal Award for Visual Arts*

Jared Beck and Pamela Miner made the perfect team to tell the architectural history of Fort Myers, which they do through photos of houses and mini-chapters on each.

With a degree in landscape architecture, Beck has done large-scale town planning in addition to creating detailed architectural and design guidelines. Miner is a historian, educator, and museum professional with a master’s degree in history/historic preservation.

Focusing on neighborhoods on and around McGregor Boulevard, River and Road features 28 dwellings, starting with a bungalow showcasing Asian flair, and ending with a signature 21st century modern house.

In between is a parade that includes examples of colonial, art deco, Spanish, ranch, Tudor, Dutch revival, mid-century modern, and a mixture of many more.

“Connections linking homes, neighborhoods, and people were unexpected as we began this journey. We are able to share sort of folk stories that have not been written down,” Miner tells FORUM.

The authors interviewed the owners, compiling the history of each dwelling.

Miner lives in Naples, Beck in Fort Myers.

**NEW ADULT**

**Jenny Torres Sanchez**

*Because of the Sun*

*Gold Medal, Young Adult*

When Jenny Torres Sanchez graduated high school, she vowed never to return to such an environment. But she did — and it represented a turning point.

She came back as an English teacher and found her students to be “some of the coolest people I have ever met and a large part of why I write (young adult),” Sanchez says on her website.

Dani, the protagonist in **Because of the Sun**, goes into a shell when her mother dies violently. She is sent from Florida to live with her aunt in New Mexico, further isolating her. She takes long walks in the desert, meets a boy, and finds a way to overcome her personal tragedy. Despite the heat, all is cool.

“I tend to overuse the word cool, but this by no means diminishes its utter awesomeness and coolness,” Torres Sanchez says.

She lives in Orlando with her husband and children.
A historian bridges the Gulf


By Ron Cunningham

**Pop quiz:** What's the link between Saturday morning cartoons and a biological “dead zone” the size of New Jersey?

When Jack Davis poses that question to his environmental history students at the University of Florida he is apt to get blank stares.

“‘And I tell them, ‘Well, you have to read the book,’” he grins. Which is pretty good advice, and not just for his students.

Davis’ book, *The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea*, is more than a superbly written, meticulously researched 150-million-year history of what Davis regards as the woefully misnamed Gulf of Mexico (“‘The Gulf’s history,” he writes, “is America’s history.”)

It is also the winner of this year’s Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction.

“It has been an extraordinary experience,” Davis says. “I have not yet been able to reconcile the idea of Jack Davis and Pulitzer Prize in the same sentence.”

As an environmental historian, Davis is by nature something of a detective.

“Most historians look for conflict, but when I research and write, I look for connections,” he says, “the temporal connections between people and place.”

Thus, his chapter about the nutrient-laden dead zone that begins off the Mississippi Delta and spreads for miles out into the Gulf connects the Baby Boom population explosion, the rise of the fast food industry, and the marketing of a bewildering variety of breakfast cereals on Saturday morning cartoon shows in the 1950s and ’60s.

Reacting to new consumer demands and dramatic changes in the American diet, Midwestern farmers began to grow more corn and wheat to produce breakfast cereals, sweeten sodas, and make burger buns. This required the application of more fertilizers, which in turn sent more phosphorus-rich runoff downstream and out to sea, where the oxygen-depleted water would make life impossible for marine species that once thrived just offshore.

“Who could have imagined that a cheerful bowl of cereal in the morning and a simple burger and fries in the evening would give the Gulf a respiratory ailment?” Davis writes.

**An interconnected story**

And there is one more dot that needs connecting to properly tell this story.

“The Florida connection is the phosphate,” he says. “‘We mine it around the Tampa Bay area and send it to the Midwest to fertilize the cereal. Then it comes back down to us via the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico.”

One lesson that Davis wants to impart in *The Gulf* is that the decisions we make, individually and as a society, inevitably come back to visit us.

“I wanted to show Americans that their sea is something more than an oil sump and a sunny beach,” he says. “‘To show them that we’re all connected to the Gulf of Mexico, to its history and ecology.”

The writing of *The Gulf* was a work in progress for longer than Davis cares to remember. The sheer scope of his subject created something of a writer’s block. He credits an article he wrote for FORUM for helping him come to terms with how to unfold the epic story of Earth’s 10th-largest body of water.

In 2011, after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Davis was asked by FORUM to write about the Gulf.

“It was an important piece for me because it forced me to figure out how I might organize the book,” he says. “With the deadline looming, I had to do it, so I wrote the article and then thought, ‘OK, I can do this book as well.’”

Davis’ book is populated by a colorful cast of heroes, scoundrels, explorers, exploiters, entrepreneurs, environmentalists, and even a Tabasco sauce king whose lives and deeds have impacted the Gulf for better or worse. But the
character who most inspired him — the author's own personal hero — was Walter Anderson, an eccentric Mississippi artist who lived a hermit-like existence among the islands of the upper Gulf — once even riding out a hurricane alone on a tiny barrier strip of sand, oyster reefs and mangroves.

“He was family in nature’s house,” Davis writes. “He would not cast judgement against any of its members.”

Anderson’s story was “the first chapter I wrote,” Davis says. “My agent and I submitted it when we were trying to sell the book and everybody loved it.”

Anderson died of lung cancer in a New Orleans hospital in 1965, “in civilization’s grip, not in nature’s embrace.” When his sister went to his small cottage, “dust caked and disheveled,” she discovered thousands of drawings, watercolors, block prints and sketches from his wanderings amid the Gulf’s “shifting sands of time.”

Anderson’s life “had the greatest impact on me,” Davis says. “He was in awe of the Gulf, and he said that when you realize the beauty in nature you realize the beauty in man. That, I think, is good advice to follow.”

Davis comes by his fascination with the Gulf of Mexico honestly, having grown up on the Gulf, first in Fort Walton Beach and then in the Tampa Bay area.

“Clearly, as I was writing the book I was constantly going back to my childhood,” he says. “For me as an environmental historian, capturing a sense of place is extremely important, and I have this long, intimate relationship with the Gulf of Mexico.”

A doctoral graduate of Brandeis University, Davis was director of environmental studies at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, and taught at Eckerd College and the University of Jordan before coming to the University of Florida. Davis lives with his 12-year old daughter, Willa, in a 70-year-old house in Gainesville he renovated himself, mostly using salvaged and recycled materials.

He is the author of An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century, which in 2009 received the Florida Book Awards gold medal for nonfiction.

He is currently working on a book about bald eagles: Bird of Paradox: How the Bald Eagle Saved the Soul of America.

How conservation efforts brought bald eagles back from the brink of extinction “is a wonderful ... success story that appeals to both liberals and conservatives,” he says, “and I want to write a book that will be read by more than just the choir.”

Realistic and hopeful

His book offers a detailed account of the Gulf’s degradation due to overfishing, oil spills, exploitive industrial practices, and poorly planned development that has eroded shorelines, reduced marine and migrating bird populations, and impaired water quality. But Davis also takes pains to point out the people and events that are beginning to make a positive difference in the death and life of the Gulf.

And at the end, his best advice about how Americans can be better stewards of their very own sea comes down to this:

“The first step that’s absolutely necessary is to rethink this age-old idea that humans have to control nature. Sometimes you just have to back off and let nature take its course. The natural environment gives us more gifts when we leave it alone then when we try to manage it or improve it.”

And there are indications that some are beginning to take that advice to heart. Cedar Key, after cleaning up leaky septic tanks and installing a new wastewater treatment system, is now developing a “clean aquaculture” clam industry. Similarly, in Panacea, residents are growing cultured oysters that depend on an ample mix of clean fresh and salt water to thrive. And after Pensacola got rid of its antiquated waterfront sewage treatment plant, its once-moribund downtown underwent an economic renaissance.

“And despite what’s going on in Texas,” epicenter of the nation’s petrochemical industry, “it would be a lot worse if not for the many local activists and city officials who care about the Gulf shore and have worked to mitigate a lot of the damage and restore their bays,” Davis says. “Those are the people who give me hope.”

To read an excerpt from The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea, please visit Floridahumanities.org/blog.
Marjory Stoneman Douglas’ Florida

By Jack E. Davis

Marjory Douglas had been riding the train for days when it crossed the Florida border into depleting September heat. Before leaving New York, she bought a blue worsted dress for the journey. The purchase had been an indulgence, something tangible in a life recently weighted with uncertainty. But she had not been thinking of the woolen heat in Florida. And she was still another 12 hours in the dress from Jacksonville, where she changed trains, to her final destination in Miami at the end of the Flagler line. Until Dixie Highway opened to automobile travel later that year, options for getting to south Florida in 1915 were tediously slow.

As relentless as the heat were the stops. There were the bare-board freight depots, where she sat mutely looking out at black men handling crates of fruits and vegetables, their sweat-soaked shirts adhering to their backs as the dress to hers.

Eye-catching in another way were the waterside resorts built by the late oil mogul Henry Flagler to generate passengers for his railway. They were palisades of exclusivity for the leisure class — ornate, expansive, kingly, rising castle-like above planted palms on landscaped grounds, inklings of the inevitable loss to Florida’s still vast wilderness.

Between stops, the train was a machine-serpent invader sliding past her window much of the way. It was a signature repulsion of the state’s boosters, swamps, deemed malarial wastelands suitable for little else besides drainage. Decades earlier, winter resident Harriet Beecher Stowe reconciled the prevailing aversion with her singular appreciation for wetlands; she called them the “most gorgeous of improprieties.” Douglas shared Stowe’s sensibilities toward nature and would one day emerge as the senior advocate of the most maligned wetland, the Everglades. But that was nearly a lifetime away on the other side of the century. Her immediate ambition was to be a professional writer.

Before her rendezvous with the Everglades, she would write about another repulsed native landmark, pine trees. During the urban boom of the next decade, she declared in a Miami Herald column that she “dispensed hatred, wrath, superiority and scorn” wherever the construction of a new subdivision began by “clearing every pine.” By midcentury, 99 percent of the South’s first-growth pine ecosystem would be gone. The train ride introduced her to its monarch, the tall and stately longleaf. The trees filed past in the millions, reminding her of “marching armies in retreat.” She herself was regrouping, leaving behind a failed attempt at seizing life, and through her window came the trees’ “sunny resinous breath,” the hopeful scent of a new country.

Douglas was 25, a Midwesterner by birth, a New Englander by upbringing. She had been to Florida once before, briefly, when she was 5 and traveling with her parents aboard a Plant Line steamer out of New Orleans to Havana. En route, the ship called at Henry Plant’s Tampa Bay Hotel of Moorish elegance. Douglas later remembered plucking an orange from a tree while in someone’s arms, lying seasick when the steamer was underway, and little else. A white tropical light suffused the stateroom, magically eased her queasiness, and lifted her mood.

Northern skies to which she returned were comparatively disenchanting, and ultimately a backdrop for corresponding events of the next 20 years. Her parents separated, her father left permanently for Florida, her mother succumbed to cancer, and her husband turned out to be an implacable thief and charlatan. Florida brought escape from him and reunion with her father. Off the train, and on to a new life

When the train sighed to a stop in Miami, she had an hour before he would come to retrieve her. He was a stranger, an absentee parent of 17 years, an unknown that deepened her anxiety. The depot was a homely clapboard building painted yellow in an attempt at cheerfulness. Her disposition remained
otherwise when she wandered the town. Its unpainted buildings and dusty limestone streets failed to impress her. She then turned east toward Biscayne Bay; it was “diamond-edged” and “dazzling,” she wrote, breathing a healthy air of cycling life that suggested — perhaps — renewal in her own.

What finally reversed her spiral was the rising sun. Across the water, it cast that inoculating light she had momentarily experienced as a child. It was a South Florida light, whiter and more elevating than that she had seen in Jacksonville. She would live beneath it for the rest of her life. Even on overcast days it would reach through and loosen cordons of despair and bring her home.

She quickly became equally at ease with her father, Frank Bryant Stoneman. The founding editor of the Miami Herald, he gave her a job, her first as a professional, with instructions to write poems, book reviews, and about women, nothing more. Quietly subversive, reasserting her family name under the byline Marjory Stoneman Douglas, she also wrote about politics, social justice, science, philosophy, and the indigenous surroundings, “our tropic ecstasy.”

She infused her allotted 2-inch-wide column with tributes to natural wonders of south Florida — the “lacy pinelands,” the sky’s “open sweep,” the “snappy golden and peacock weather,” the “lime green and jade and jasper” sea — heralding all as the pulsing heart in Miami's potential. A city’s identity, its greatness, she wrote, “cannot begin” with economics, government, or even people “until you have considered the earth on which the whole rests and which conditions everything.” She was forever challenging others who complained about Florida’s tabletop geography. We have mountains, she insisted. “Wake up any morning,” cast your eye outward, and “ascend with a leap ... to a range of shouting cloud mountains, whiter than whiteness.”

Finding her lifelong sanctuary

Despite her bidding, Miami disappointed. “Mothered by beauty such as earth makes known,” it had been “fathered by all the greed of men ... eager to mark this also his own.”

One enclave, though, had resisted the temptation of “going after progress.” When she lived with her father, she and friends would bike out to the hammock-shaded village of Coconut Grove, where at the edge of the bay its namesake palm leaned nimbly into the trade winds. Banyan trees and tropical hardwoods arched overhead in flying-buttressed domes, and the “lavender-blue clouds of the jacaranda trees” and flowery-yellow draperies of shower-of-gold trees added decorative color. Amid this blush of growing things lived artists, naturalists, writers, and intellectuals, whose inquisitive and creative temperaments matched hers and who invited the natural world into their lives.

After striking out on her own as a freelance writer, she bought a lot in the Grove and hired an architect to design a “sensible house” that took “Florida conditions into account.” That meant letting in sunlight and breezes. Built with hurricane-thick walls, the house minimized the size and importance of the kitchen,

Marjory Stoneman Douglas, then 93, on the back patio of her Coconut Grove cottage in 1983.
Envision the workings of a teenager’s brain, and you immediately recall how it’s all go and no stop in there, how that discerning frontal lobe is still disconnected from the party in the back of the head.

But you don’t hear as much about how the brain’s highly emotive limbic system, going full-tilt between the ages of 12 and 20, can make words shimmer, rhythms reverberate and ideas blossom for impressionable young adults. Or how their hormone-bathed synapses allow them to learn and retain anything they turn their minds to, making adolescents quicker picker-uppers than they’ll ever be for the rest of their lives.

This explains the genius behind Poetry Out Loud, the annual nationwide competition that engages high-school-aged Americans at the most opportune moment to try to memorize a poem.

It’s the time when they’re champions at not only learning about literature, but also learning to love it.

And their novelty-seeking nerve endings make poetry even more seductive when it comes with an element of surprise, as in Walker Percy’s famous essay. There, he imagines a young biology student, who, finding pinned to her laboratory dissection table a copy of Shakespeare’s 73rd sonnet, “might catch fire at the beauty of it.”

Natalie Schimek of Sarasota, Florida’s statewide winner of the 2018 Poetry Out Loud recitation event held in Tampa, knows something about quietly catching fire, and being caught up in a new experience. She participated in POL for the first time as a high school senior, and she had almost no idea of what to expect.

“It’s kind of insane,” Natalie says, taking small sips of beige foam from an oversized coffee cup at her neighborhood Panera, where she is tucked into a booth by

Meet Natalie Schimek, this year’s state Poetry Out Loud winner — the joy of verse comes alive for her as she recites the work of others … and creates poems of her own

By Barbara Peters Smith
Career Path to Salvation, or, Am I Doing This Right?

By Natalie Schimek

I used to want to tell stories. To create something of nothing, but I don’t think I can. I don’t think I have enough me in me to give. But—

I have sat under the shower, watched the water spit towards me and wondered how you turn the frayed edge of a towel into a map of the universe. How you made your name in pink cotton candy skywriting and projected it through a bullhorn. Taught to hold a bottle with only six fingers. Taught to pull the trigger with only six fingers.

I wanna know about undented soap and razors rusted from years of disuse. About the splatter on white tile you make with only your breath and less than six fingers. I wanna know about lightning bolts on thighs, about the neurotransmitter stabbed into your hip so when you don’t have enough, you still have some.

I wanna know sharp pain. Teach me, please, to make something of nothing. To turn me into beautiful, I into symphony, into garden.

I wanna say how you became the giving tree, but I’m not sure how to tell them that you are what the world does to good things. I am certain that one day, someone will tell the story of you in the frayed edge of a towel, and I am certain that someone cannot be me.

the window, knitting. “I did not anticipate making it to the state level, let alone national level.”

POL began as The National Poetry Recitation Contest, the brainchild of Dana Gioia, the first poet to serve as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. Now run by the NEA, the Poetry Foundation, and state arts agencies — including the Florida Humanities Council — it involved more than 300,000 students this year, 9,050 of them in Florida.

“Students choose the poems they wish to memorize either from the free classroom anthology or the Poetry Foundation’s special website, which offers 700 diverse selections,” Gioia explained in an essay published in Zócalo Public Square.

“Beginning with classroom competitions, winners advance to individual school contests, then to city, regional, and eventually state finals. The state winners come to Washington, D.C. for the national finals.”

Gioia described the contest as a deliberate campaign to celebrate the oral tradition of poetry as “a social rather than solitary activity — something to be shared with family and friends.”

Natalie came to POL in that spirit, having written poems on her own since a seventh-grade creative writing class, and enjoyed hearing and watching spoken-word poetry. Her favorites include Kevin Kantor, Sarah Kay, and Phil Kaye.

“A lot of my friends are also into poetry,” Natalie says. “I’m very lightly involved in Drama Club, but I’ve been doing speech and debate since my freshman year, and the event that I do is a poetry-based event, and I’ve had experience performing poems.”

Natalie comes by her interest in the arts and humanities through nature and nurture: Her mother, Lori Brody, is an artist, and her father, David Schimek, is a middle school history teacher. Both parents watched her win the state title in March, and her mother accompanied her to the national finals in April.

“I think my mom was more excited than I am,” Natalie says. “So, yes, they were excited; I think they were also surprised.”

Natalie and her brother grew up making acrylic paintings with their mother, and it was at a Sarasota crafts festival that Natalie had her first encounter with fiber arts.

“This woman was selling handspun yarn and I asked her how she made it, and she told me how to make my own spindle,” she says. “I knit and crochet a lot. I spin my own yarn. I don’t have a sheep myself,” she says, smiling, “but I order it from the sheep.”

Her school has been involved with Poetry Out Loud for eight years, and Natalie is its first student to win the state competition. Pine View School for the Gifted draws students from throughout Sarasota County from the second grade through high school, and she has spent most of her educational life there.

“I don’t really know anything other than having this amazing family of a school around you,” she says. “It’s been really awesome and sweet.”

Paul Dean, a Sarasota poet and longtime English teacher at Pine View, co-sponsors a poetry club at the school — they hold slams every quarter — and helped Natalie prepare for Poetry Out Loud.

“I think what distinguished Natalie was how natural she was,” he says. “She has this knack. She looks perfectly comfortable onstage. And she has this gift of intimacy: Even though the audience is large, it feels like it’s just you and her.”

His praise would make Natalie laugh and look away; she speaks with a diffidence and self-containment that make her seem older than she really is. But if you ask her to bring up her three poems she memorized for the competition — “An Apology For Her Poetry” by Margaret Cavendish, “Across the Bay” by Donald Davie, and “After Apple-Picking” by Robert Frost — her tongue loosens.

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For more information on Poetry Out Loud, and to view a video of this year’s state Poetry Out Loud competition, visit floridahumanities.org/blog
Donna, Elena, Andrew, Charley, Frances, Ivan, Jeanne, Wilma, Hermine, and Irma — the list conjures up lost chapters of the Bible. To many Floridians, the names resonate as a modern Book of Lamentations, a roster of hurricanes that brought ruin to the Sunshine State.

Mayans named the storms that roiled the tropical waters after the god of birth and destruction, el Huracán. For millennia, hurricanes have shaped and reshaped the place we call Florida. Tempestuous winds and currents created new passes, bisected islands, and propelled flora and fauna across the warm waters. The hurricane coasts unite and define Florida, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean.

Sixteenth-century weather altered the arc of Florida history, washing away the fledgling Spanish colony on Pensacola Bay. A providential storm battered a French fleet dispatched to reinforce the Huguenot colony at Fort Caroline, allowing St. Augustine to claim the title of America’s oldest permanent European city.

Hurricanes cratered the hopes of the once-promising cities of Magnolia, Port Leon and St. Joseph. In 1848, a wall of water leveled the frontier town of Tampa, prompting a chaplain’s daughter to write, “Tampa is no more.” In 1896, a reporter described storm-tossed Cedar Key as “a place of desolation and death.”

In 1926, the South Florida land boom was at high tide. On Sept. 17, warnings circulated of a disturbance raking the Caribbean. Warning a population, most of whom had never encountered a hurricane, was futile. The hurricane battered Dade and Broward counties, leaving nearly a third of Dade County’s residents homeless. Some have suggested it also provided the nickname for the new University of Miami football team, whose first game was postponed a month by the storm.

When folklorist Stetson Kennedy interviewed oldtimers in the 1930s, they told him of storms so strong, they “scattered the days of the week so bad Sunday didn’t get around till late Tuesday morning.”
World War II introduced terrifying new weapons and new technologies to tame nature’s wrath. Hours before Col. Paul Tibbets dropped an atomic bomb over Nagasaki, the mayor of Bradenton urged President Harry Truman to hurl the weapon into an approaching hurricane. Days later, the Lee County Commission offered the U.S. government a 7,500-acre tract for the "atomic bombing of hurricanes."

In 1947, two powerful hurricanes slammed Broward County. The year witnessed the dedication of Everglades National Park, but the most far-reaching consequence was politicians' efforts to tame the land and water. Congress authorized the Central and Southern Flood Control District, a powerful body that opened vast acreage for development and agriculture.

Hello to the 'him-icanes'

In 1953, the National Weather Bureau, following naval tradition, began assigning women's names to tropical systems. The debut of Hurricane Alice in 1953 coincided with another new technology: television. The weather map fit perfectly inside the TV screen. Predictably, weathermen exploited the opportunity to feminize nature. “Temperamental” hurricanes “flirted” with Caribbean islands and "teased" Florida.

In the late ’60s, Roxcy Bolton, a founder of the Florida chapter of the National Organization for Women, confronted the male establishment at the National Hurricane Center. She insisted that hurricanes also have male names, even floating the idea they be called “him-icanes.” Bolton ultimately prevailed, and in 1979 the season’s second storm debuted as Hurricane Bob.

Hurricane Donna crossed the Florida Keys in September 1960 before making landfall in Southwest Florida. At the time, Collier County had a population of 16,000 residents. Donna deposited six feet of water in Everglades City, prompting the county seat to be moved to Naples.

In her 1958 book, Hurricane, author Marjory Stoneman Douglas, a Coconut Grove resident, reminded neighbors, “There is no hurricane but the hurricane that one lived through.”

Florida experienced only three landfall hurricanes in the 1970s, with the trend continuing through the 1980s. Many residents had never experienced a hurricane. In mid-August 1992, Hurricane Andrew aimed for Miami but swerved at the last moment, barreling into Homestead. The Miami Herald described the storm as “a Category 5 chainsaw that cut a swath of ruin like no storm before it.” Andrew’s toll was sobering: 44 deaths, 28,000 destroyed homes, 107,000 damaged structures, 350,000 evacuees, and a $27.3 billion bill.

Quiet, then storm after storm

To be a Floridian is to be an optimist focusing on the future, not the past. Twelve years is an eternity in a state that was growing at warp speed, adding a thousand new residents every day. Memories of Andrew faded.

Alarms sounded again on Aug. 12, 2004, and more than 1 million Tampa Bay residents began a mass evacuation. Experts predicted Hurricane Charley was headed into the mouth of Tampa Bay, a region not hit by a major storm in 90 years. The exodus resulted in many refugees stranded on the world’s greatest parking lots — I-4 and I-75.

Revealing the imperfections of weather forecasting, on Friday the 13th Charley’s “cone of death” abruptly made a right-hand turn and Charlotte County absorbed the storm’s most powerful punch. Charley’s winds wrecked neighborhoods from Port Charlotte to Arcadia, from Orlando to Ormond Beach. In Orlando, a city not struck by a hurricane since 1960, locals clocked winds at 90 miles per hour.

Floridians had barely exhaled when climatologists warned of a second storm. By early September 2004, more than 2.5 million Floridians were on the road again. On Labor Day weekend, Hurricane Frances smashed into Martin County.

The Sept. 6, 2004, headline of the Bradenton Herald became a collectors’ item: “Are We Done Yet?” Exhausted Floridians confronted the season’s third storm. Hurricane Ivan hit Pensacola Bay squarely and savagely with 135 mph winds, spawning a 15-foot tidal surge. Highway 98 became impassable.

More on the storms: For readers’ memories of storms of the past, and to share your own, please visit floridahumanities.org/blog. FHC’s Florida Stories walking tour app tells the story of the hurricane that wiped out Islamorada. Download the app at flstories.org
aggravated by the collapse of I-10 spans over Escambia Bay.

Dazed Floridians could scarcely believe news of an unprecedented fourth tropical storm. St. Lucie County’s Hutchinson Island, where underwater demolition teams trained during World War II, stood in Hurricane Jeanne’s crosshairs. Not since Texas in 1886 had a state been hit by a hurricane four times in a year.

Almost no part of the state escaped the ferocious winds and storm-tossed waters of 2004. Every school closed at least once during the season of displacement and destruction.

In July 2005, Hurricane Dennis made landfall at Navarre Beach in Santa Rosa County. Dennis raked and breached the Panhandle’s barrier islands, inflicting $1.5 billion in damages. In late September, Hurricane Rita skirted south of the Florida Keys.

On Oct. 19, Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center, received an early morning telephone call, informing him that Wilma had intensified into a historic Category 5 storm, bearing the lowest atmospheric pressure ever recorded. After crossing the Yucatán, Wilma intensified while crossing the Gulf of Mexico, making landfall at Cape Romano, south of Naples, at 120 miles per hour. Wilma exited near Palm Beach, leaving behind a tangled toll: 62 deaths, 6 million Floridians without electricity, and $21 billion in damages.

“If you could designate a hurricane a Category 6,” remarked a meteorologist, “that’s probably what we would have said Wilma was.”

The stage seemed set for a new era of destructive hurricanes. Six whirlwinds had smacked the Sunshine State in two years. Yet nothing, it seemed, could deflate the Florida boom. Mere months after Hurricane Ivan sheared Escambia County, property values rose across Pensacola Bay and snowbirds returned to Punta Gorda and Lake Wales. Remarkably, Florida added over 400,000 new residents between July 2004 and July 2005, the largest increase in any single year of the decade.

A decade passed without a serious hurricane striking Florida. In September 2016, however, two tropical storms emerged: Hurricanes Hermine and Matthew. The former made landfall at St. Marks while the latter storm brushed St. Augustine and Fernandina, resulting in flooding and high tidal surges.

In September 2017, Floridians braced for the big one. Hurricane Irma, named for the German goddess of war, barreled across the Florida Keys before hitting Naples and Bonita Springs with frightening wind gusts. The hurricane was expected to hit Tampa Bay but veered slightly to the east and barreled toward the Georgia border. Irma set new Florida records for cost and aggravation. Airports, theme parks, and schools shuttered doors and windows. Authorities ordered 6.5 million Floridians to evacuate.

How we’ve fared through the storms


Hurricanes deliver terrible natural disasters, except, of course there is nothing “natural” about erecting dikes on lakes, renourishing beaches, or building high-rise condos on barrier islands.

Today’s technology always seems obsolete when measured by the tools of tomorrow. Consider the events of 2004 from the perspective of journalist David Flesher: “Twitter did not exist, neither did the iPhone. A new website called Facebook had just been created in a Harvard dorm room.”

While cell phones were popular, storms disrupted power grids, paralyzing cell communication. But the few remaining pay phones worked. Young people, however, were clueless as to how the old analog technology functioned, and, as recounted in several news stories, had to ask old timers how to negotiate the low-tech phone booth.

Hurricanes have battered and bent Florida’s richest and poorest neighborhoods. Irresistibly named Easy Street in Port Charlotte could not deflect the ominous winds of 2004, just as the hurricane of 1926 blitzed ritzy Miami Beach.

In Florida as elsewhere, catastrophes inspire compassion and mercy. Over the years, teenagers volunteered to clean up trailer parks while Mennonites rebuilt strangers’ homes. Stories abound of strangers helping strangers, neighbors helping neighbors.

Hurricanes teach lessons of love, humility, and community. Teacher Russelle Lee planned her 2004 wedding reception in Hendry County’s most beautiful building, the Clewiston Inn. A Glades dune buggy awaited the newlyweds, as did Hurricane Jeanne. The wedding reception became a celebration of love and survival, as hundreds of residents huddled and partied in the town’s stormiest evacuation structure. “We’re pretty tough out here,” the bride explained.

Environmentally, hurricanes replenish beaches with shells and recharge springs and aquifers, but also rearrange the landscape, destroying sand dunes, blowing

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Your hurricane memories: To read more hurricane memories and share you own, please visit floridahumanities.org/blog
A hurricane that time forgot

In October 1811, St. Augustine experienced a violent storm’s death and destruction, but the war that followed blotted out the memories

By Sherry Johnson

“On the 5th of October a violent hurricane hit this city. It caused terrible damage to the houses in town … The destruction is so great that these poor people are entirely ruined.”

So wrote the interim governor of Spanish East Florida, Juan José de Estrada, on Dec. 5, 1811. In spite of causing several deaths and considerable property loss, the October 1811 hurricane remains totally unknown, both in the official listings on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration website and within Florida’s hurricane history.

The hurricane likely made a direct hit at St. Augustine, coming in from the east during daylight hours. It appears to have been compact, since the worst destruction was confined to the city and surrounding area. The greatest damage was caused by floodwater, the killer wave known in modern terminology as the storm surge. It rose over the community, especially vulnerable since it was built on low-lying land and was surrounded by water. As the hurricane intensified, the Matanzas and North Rivers that make up Matanzas Bay combined with those of Maria Sanchez Creek, creating a wall of water laden with debris. Fueled with the wreckage of houses and other buildings that fronted the bay, the storm surge was transformed into a battering ram that even the most substantial structures could not withstand. Small boats and dinghies broke away from their moorings and floated through the streets and in the main square, the Plaza de Armas. As the waters continued to rise, “the residents fled from their homes in fear for their lives looking for any secure place to save themselves.” At the height of the storm, land and water would have been indistinguishable.

As soon as the immediate danger had passed, the governor and a contingent of troops went out into the streets to evaluate the damage and render emergency aid. Among the governor’s first acts was to deputize four men (comisarios del barrio), chosen before the disaster for their competence, judgment, and standing in their community, who were responsible for patrolling the streets and maintaining order in their neighborhoods. As the

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And then came the tempest

Remembering the deadly, game-changing Okeechobee hurricane of 1928

By Eliot Kleinberg

Florida's modern history — since the arrival of Europeans — dates back 500 years, but most of it has occurred in this century. And along with each major development, a hurricane usually has trailed close behind.

Any map makes it clear why Florida is such a frequent target. Its 1,350-mile coastline accounts for more than one third of that for the hurricane strike zone; from Texas' Mexico border to the tip of Maine. And the place sticks out into the sea like a sore thumb.

Sore is right.

Of the 289 hurricanes to strike the United States from 1851 to 2015, 108 — more than one third — included a Florida landfall. Break down the total of 289 to just the 97 major hurricanes — with top sustained winds of at least 111 mph — and 42 of those hit Florida.

Eighteen of those had a landfall east of Lake Okeechobee and south of Cape Canaveral, in what is the state's most densely populated area.

And in a nine-year period, Florida suffered through three of the 20th century's four most significant hurricanes (Andrew was the fourth.) The 1926 storm ended the boom in Miami. The 1935 storm washed Henry Flagler's railroad to Key West into the sea. In between was the great Okeechobee storm on Sept. 16, 1928.

Ninety years ago this fall, Florida experienced its most profound single event in terms of loss of life. And not surprisingly, it was a hurricane. Also not surprisingly, it killed not by wind, as people think hurricanes mostly do, but by water, which is by far a tropical cyclone's deadliest weapon.

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Surprisingly, in a place surrounded on three sides by the sea, as many as 3,000 people drowned in fresh water.

The storm is the second-deadliest weather event to strike America — behind only the Galveston hurricane of 1900, which killed 6,000 to 12,000 — and the biggest in the eastern United States. Nothing else comes close. (That grim distinction might change; a May 2018 New England Journal of Medicine report said Puerto Rico's death toll from 2017's Maria could be more than 4,500.)

The 1928 storm's official death toll was 1,836. For Palm Beach County, well into the boom along its coast, but with a population still at only about 50,000, that represented one of every 25 people. But all but a few dozen of the deaths are believed to have occurred at the county's rural western end, with a population of only about 8,000. Everyone knew someone who died.

And the figure of 1,836 almost certainly was too low. Too many people were hurriedly put into mass graves or stacked in piles of bones years later in the fields. Historians suggest 3,000 is a more realistic number. In 2003, for the storm's 75th anniversary, the National Hurricane Center upgraded the official death toll to 2,500 — not from any new information, but rather an acknowledgment that the long-held number was just flat-out wrong. Include those lost in Puerto Rico and deaths on U.S. soil surpass 4,500; add deaths on other Caribbean islands and it's more than 6,800.

It's quite possibly the most underreported natural disaster in American history. And you likely never heard of it. That, too, speaks to history. The storm was followed in short order by the Depression, and memories can be fleeting. Perhaps more tellingly, most of the victims, especially the ones around Lake Okeechobee, were poor, black migrant workers. So one has to wonder, had it killed 3,000 businessmen in downtown West Palm Beach, might we still be talking about it?

The giant dike that mostly hides Lake Okeechobee from view is a towering reminder that history is not abstract. The dike is there because of the great Okeechobee hurricane.

When state and federal officials drained the Everglades at the start of the 20th century and invited farming in, a flimsy berm was built around Lake Okeechobee. When the storm passed over the great lake, the berm collapsed.

Weather forecasters, who had yet to learn the humility of today's meteorologists, had boldly stated the storm would miss Florida, but even those who'd prepared for a direct hit had few options.

One was Vernon "Vernie" Boots. His father had come to help build the new U.S. 27 highway. The Bootses lived 300 feet from the lake's south shore.

During the storm, about 60 people, including the Boots family, took refuge at a neighbor's home. As water rose through the floorboards, people moved to the attic, but it followed. They chopped a hole in the roof to escape drowning, but that only exposed them to the winds.

The home lifted off its foundations and floated 100 yards, then struck the raised roadbed of the unfinished U.S. 27. It struck two more times, then came apart. Vernie Boots grabbed a piece of ceiling and floated in waves as high as 4 feet. His screams were drowned out by the winds.
swooped into South Florida to help people rebuild their lives.

The state and federal government were criticized for a slow response and promised to do better, but reviews of responses in ensuing storms continued to be mixed, right up to, and including, Andrew in 1992.

But the most dramatic reaction to the destruction was the construction of the dike. State and national leaders realized a few feet of muck had not stopped the great lake's waters, and would not do so next time. Their options: Yield to nature's power and abandon the interior, or try to overcome. They choose the latter. It took decades, but now the giant mound surrounding Lake Okeechobee keeps it from becoming an engine of death. At least, that's the theory. But the dike leaks, and the state and federal governments fight a never-ending battle to shore it up.

After the storm, 674 of the black victims were placed in a mass grave in the black section of West Palm Beach, in a field surrounded by a chain-link fence. It would be three-quarters of a century before the city bought the property.

In January 2002, the grave officially was recognized. A walkway now led from 25th Street to the black historical marker with white lettering that identified the site and told the story of the storm and the mass grave.

"Forgive us, oh Lord," said Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell of the Diocese of Palm Beach at the dedication, "for the times when we allowed hate, or just prejudice, or situations that we grew up with, to shield from our eyes, and especially our hearts, the reality of your love for us and the reality that we are all alike."

Local activists still hope to see a memorial and educational center that would tell about the people of all races and classes who worked the farm fields. And of the power of nature and the tragic circumstances that descended upon South Florida in September 1928.


In 1988, speaking to students at Palm Beach Community College’s Belle Glade campus, Boots recalled the moment six decades earlier when he’d awakened before dawn, still floating, and shouted for his three brothers. As he described finding two of them, he choked with emotion.

The brothers would find high ground and eventually reunite with a half-brother. Their father and a third brother were later found dead. Their mother was never found. The three brothers later moved in with their half-brother and his family.

South Florida, and the nation, learned from the storm.

Building codes were rethought; for example, engineers found many homes were not bolted to their slabs, because builders had assumed the weight of the house would keep it from moving. In the storm, homes slid several inches, just enough to render them too unstable to be habitable or survive another storm.

And the American Red Cross, in only the second major response in its history,

Eliot Kleinberg talks about the hurricane of 1928 at floridahumanities.org/blog
The great hurricane of 1928 caused Lake Okeechobee to flood its banks, drowning more than 2,500 people. It remains to this day the most deadly storm ever to strike Florida.

“The tragic irony is that Indians had foretold that Lake Okeechobee would spill over its rim once again to feed the Everglades,” writes Mark Derr in his book, Some Kind of Paradise.

The Seminoles, it was said, could predict hurricanes “by watching the way sawgrass bloomed,” he continues. “Scientists speculated that atmospheric changes preceding a hurricane made the pollen from sawgrass visible for several days before the blow.”

Ninety years later, the science of hurricane forecasting and tracking has so advanced that it is no longer necessary to rely on local lore or blind luck to survive the advancing storm.

And it’s getting better. Consider the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s launch last year of a GOES-16 geostationary satellite that enables real-time tracking of storms with updates every 30 seconds. Computer-assisted forecasting provides ever more accurate information about where hurricanes are going, when they will get there and how strong they are likely to be.

Which is not to say that public awareness about hurricane impacts has necessarily kept up with the science. As National Hurricane Center Director Ken Graham cautioned at this year’s annual Florida Hurricane Conference:

“Here’s the deal: We could make a perfect forecast, but if people don’t understand it, it doesn’t count. We have to talk about the cone and communicate that we can still get impacts hundreds of miles away.”

Science and public education aside, two critical factors are conspiring to further complicate hurricane preparedness and disaster response in Florida, and will likely continue to do so.

In 1928, just more than 1 million souls called Florida home. Today, more than 21 million live here, with 14 million concentrated in coastal counties.

“No matter how well your response is, it’s still going to look horrible when you have to evacuate millions of people over road systems that aren’t built for this,” says Craig Fugate, former Federal Emergency Management Agency director, who lives in North Central Florida. “We have far too many people who have built and continue to build in hurricane evacuation zones.”

Further complicating Florida’s surging coastal population growth is increasing evidence that rising sea levels and warming ocean conditions mean Florida is likely to experience more intense and wetter hurricanes in the future.

That is the “thing that wakes me up in the middle of the night,” says Dr. Richard S. Olson, director of the Extreme Events Institute and International Hurricane Research Center at Florida International University. “If you start factoring in the possibility of increasing numbers of Category 4 and 5 storms, and climate scientists are pretty clear about that, then that pattern may become the new normal.”
Preparing for the ‘new normal’

So how to prepare for the “new normal” of ever-stronger hurricanes visiting the ever-growing population of Florida?

First, heed the lessons of past storms. Twenty-five years ago, Andrew came ashore in Miami, leveling neighborhoods and causing more than $10 billion in damage. The wreckage was so extensive that at least 10 insurance companies went broke trying to cover losses.

The lessons of Andrew? Existing building codes were inadequate, and the private insurance market could not be relied upon to cover the losses. As a result, tougher building codes were adopted in South Florida, and the state established its Hurricane Catastrophe Fund.

The notion of building more storm-resistant communities continues to spread.

“We deal with this all the time, and not just here in South Florida but in the lowcountry of South Carolina and Gulf Coast of Texas, Mississippi and Alabama,” says Victor Dover, a Miami-based urban design consultant.

“Every day city planning conversations are taking place about how to build resiliency into the next comprehensive plan update.

“That wasn’t the case 30 years ago; it was something we had to bring up,” he says of his client communities. “Now they are bringing it up, and that’s a very good thing.”

Last year, Hurricane Irma served up another valuable lesson: that poorly conceived mass evacuation advisories might no longer be practical or safe.

Evacuation warnings issued in advance of Irma brought interstate highway traffic to a standstill from South Florida up into Georgia, potentially putting fleeing residents in more danger than if they had stayed home.

“We over-evacuated in Irma,” Olson says. “Everybody was traumatized by what Harvey had just done to Houston.

“The people that needed to be evacuated were living in the coastal zones and we needed to get them away from the water” and the threat of storm surge, he says.

“And what caught everybody by surprise was that people did not evacuate locally, they just got the hell out of Dodge. There were so many people on the open road that the road was not open.

“If you want to have fewer people driving the length of state, they need to be able to go to places that are not only hardened for safety but will allow a degree of comfort.”

Pointing to the death of several elderly patients last year at a Hollywood facility that had lost power for several days, he says “comfort in South Florida lives or dies with air conditioning. We need to rethink our sheltering system so it’s not only hardened, but reasonably comfortable for an extended period of time.”

That means a hardened utility infrastructure to eliminate days upon days without power.

At a recent Public Service Commission hearing on hurricane preparedness, Bryan Olnick, vice president for distribution and reliability at Florida Power and Light, said that aging wooden utility poles are “very much a weak link in our system.” Concrete and steel poles and underground lines are more reliable in hurricane conditions.

There is also a need to ensure that hurricane response efforts are adequate to meet the immediate emergency. This point was driven home at the Hurricane Conference when current FEMA director Brock Long said responders should be prepared to “provide your own food and water and your own commodities to your citizens for the first 48 to 72 hours.

“If you’re waiting on FEMA to run your commodities, that’s not the solution,” he said. “I can’t guarantee that we can be right on time to backfill everything you need.”

Long’s predecessor, Fugate, worries that over-reliance on FEMA’s rescue capabilities, and on the tax-subsidized federal flood insurance program, provides a perverse incentive for states and communities to continue to allow development in storm vulnerable areas.

“We price risk too cheaply,” he says. “We really need to look at how do we build and rebuild after disasters in a way that protects the homeowners and minimizes future disasters.”

In that regard, even post-Andrew building code standards might not be sufficient if more Category 4 and 5 hurricanes are in store. Florida International University’s “Wall of Wind” test facility employs an array of powerful fans and blowers to generate Category 5 wind speeds of up 157 miles per hour to test hurricane-resilient infrastructure designs.

Olson says that hurricane preparedness might increasingly hinge on adopting “code plus” standards where possible. “If you take the current code and project what would be needed to get it one (hurricane strength) category further.”

“People and assets” can be better protected “if we build more strongly and locate more smartly … that is, if the vulnerability is reduced,” he says. “You can have growth, but you can’t have stupid growth.”

That said, Olson concedes “there are practical limits” to the ability to decrease vulnerability by building stronger and smarter.

In an era of increasing hurricane intensity, he says, what happens to a community in the grip of an especially savage storm might ultimately be “in God’s hands.”

Just as Nora Zeale Hurston had prophesied.

bath, and single bedroom. Its central feature was a large work/living space with lots of casement windows and a 14-foot cathedral ceiling. There were French doors that opened out to a patio, laid in a cross-hatch of red brick. The property was narrow but 160 feet deep, sloping slightly toward a gathering of limestone rocks along the back lotline. She wished for nothing more, not even a driveway because she never drove a car.

She could walk to friends' houses for a ritual evening cocktail or invite them over for the same on the patio, which she never screened in or roofed. She needed to look up, where cloud mountains that had formed over the Everglades, to her west, drifted toward the bay, some steel-gray and ready to burst with Everglades water. After a quick thundershower, the gleaming, deepened hues of the earth were living art. When the offshore breeze shifted in the evening, she’d know to listen and look for wading birds commuting to rookeries after a day of fishing on the bay.

The patio became a creative space, too. In a canvas chair and with a lapboard, she wrote countless stories about heroes and heroines in tropical settings, and books, including her most famous, The Everglades: River of Grass.

If the words weren’t flowing, she’d putter around the garden and take in the “delightful smells of blooming things, the honey-and-arnica of sapodillas, the sweet lime and grapefruit, the spice of the long pink lilies of the coral bells.” She’d watch songbirds, “magnolia warblers, redstarts and black-throated blues. The painted and indigo buntings ... dashing blue jays and three different woodpeckers, and ... yellow-and-black orioles.”

Or, when her spirits were low, she’d simply retreat to the patio for the rejuvenating light. She lived and worked in the indoor and outdoor spaces for the next seven decades. She died there, in the spring when the yard was in color, in the morning when the birds were singing, at home, where the light had drawn her.

Jack E. Davis is the author of the award-winning An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century.

To read an excerpt from Marjory Stoneman Douglas’ The Everglades: River of Grass and Jack Davis’ An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century, please visit Floridahumanities.org/blog.

The poet’s voice continued from page 47

“When I pick poems I want to perform, it’s more for me how it feels in your mouth,” she says. “I know that sounds weird. I had a speech impediment when I was little, and I had to go to speech therapy for years and read stuff.”

Certain phrases, she explains, “were fun to pronounce” — like Davie’s line, “a blinding splinter of limestone.” She wrote the verses out in sections to help her memorize, then practiced them in front of a mirror and filmed herself reciting, and then did it “again and again and again.”

Those three poems, she says, are so familiar to her now that she’ll probably be repeating them “on my deathbed.”

“I definitely have more of an appreciation for written poetry now,” she adds. “Before doing Poetry Out Loud, I did not read written poetry; I just listened to spoken word.”

When she filled out the form to enter the state competition, she wrote that she would be attending Florida State University. But life has presented her with yet another surprise.

“That was the first school I heard back from, so I thought, why not write that down?” she says. “But I’ve actually somehow managed to get into my dream school, which is the University of St. Andrews, so I’m going there in the fall. It’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen.”

The Scottish scenery is one draw for Natalie; another is the school’s requirement that students commit to a major when they are freshmen.

“I definitely want to go into psychology,” she said. “For the past year I’ve wanted to be a clinical psychologist — but I’m sure that will change as I go through college. I just think brains are very interesting.”

Natalie Schimek delivering her winning recitation at the state Poetry Out Loud competition in Tampa in March.
down bald eagles’ nests and toppling pine trees inhabited by red-cockaded woodpeckers. Nature is resilient.

Buzz-sawing Florida’s landscape, high winds have toppled canopies that defined the wooded skylines of Lake Wales, Gainesville, and Vero Beach. As The New York Times observed in 2005: “It may be the oaks best reflect the tensions between how parts of the state once looked, and the way new development continues to alter its appearance with grand royal and date palms.”

**The civic consequences**

“Hurricanes come in two waves,” observed commentator David Brooks. “The rainstorms arrive first, followed by the human storm. But floods are also civic examinations.”

The Labor Day hurricane of 1935 represents a case study of two entangled storms. By the 1930s, Flagler’s once-glorious overseas railroad lorded over the Florida Keys like an antiquated luxury. Motorists and politicians proposed a modern highway across the Keys. Construction crews, including many World War I veterans, lived in railway cars. A ferocious storm savaged Matecumbe Key, sweeping hundreds of hapless workers into the sea. “Who murdered the vets?” asked novelist Ernest Hemingway.

When the 1896 hurricane destroyed Cedar Keys, no Federal Emergency Management Agency officials, Red Cross, or hand-wringing politicians distributing federal aid comforted the survivors. When Andrew struck South Florida in 1992, a Miami official pleaded on national television, “Where the hell is the cavalry?”

Gov. Jeb Bush understood the power of the tempest. He earned the title “hurricane governor” in 2004, also an election year. A blue-tarp state in September, Florida became a red state in November’s election.

Whatever meanings politicians and poets divine from our stormy past, one point is clear: Hurricanes are becoming more expensive. The receipts from Hurricane Irma continue to pile up, but tentative estimates range from $58 billion to $100 billion.

**A hurricane that time forgot**

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four comisarios spread out to check on their neighbors, the magnitude of the destruction became evident. The greatest damage occurred on the streets fronting the harbor, Calle de la Marina (Marine Street) and portions of Calle San Carlos (Charlotte Street) where virtually every household reported that the destruction was total. Another particularly vulnerable area fronted the Plaza de Armadura in the center of town, where the houses and business establishments were directly exposed to the rising waters of the bay.

Moving away from the waterfront, the nature of damage changed. In the western blocks of the city, the fences and walls ("cercas") around properties suffered the most damage. This may have been a function of the storm’s progress, the city’s topography — at eight feet, St. George Street is the highest point — or the strength of the enclosure’s construction. It is also possible that accumulated debris from the destroyed structures near the water piled up against walls and fences in the western blocks (for example, from St. George Street westward) and buffered the homes in the interior of the city. Nonetheless, homes and properties further inland did not escape damage altogether as the hurricane force winds destroyed what the flood waters spared. Several blocks in the south end of town may have suffered a tornado or a microburst.

Based upon examples in Cuba and Louisiana, it is safe to speculate about what happened in St. Augustine in the aftermath of the storm. As soon as the danger had passed, the governor was out among the victims giving orders to the four comisarios to initiate emergency measures. Regular military and militia would assemble into work groups to recover victims and bury the dead and to begin clearing the debris and fallen trees. All men — white, free colored, and slave alike — would pitch in and help with the tasks at hand. Simultaneously, messages would have been sent to the interior, to Mosquitos, and to Fernandina to determine the extent of the damage there. Areas where crops were not damaged would be required to gather provisions and ship them to St. Augustine as quickly as possible. After 40 years of refinement, the process would have worked like a well-oiled machine. Within one day, the leader of the military garrison at Fernandina wrote that the town had sustained only minimal damage. He would already be gathering supplies to send south to St. Augustine. Although the hurricane surge had created a sandbar that blocked the mouth of the St. Mary’s river, smaller boats were still able to navigate an open channel and sail south to the stricken city.

Those who survived the storm’s horror and the dreadful aftermath would face the rebuilding process hampered by a lack of supplies and implements. Not only was a large sector of the community left homeless, but the most immediate problem was finding food. The wind stripped the fruit-bearing trees on properties west of town owned by farmers and producers who provided provisions for the city. Several households reported damage to gardens and planting grounds, which would worsen the immediate and long-term problems with the food supply. In addition, hogs, chickens, ducks, and geese perished at a considerable loss to their owners. The necessities of life such as bread would have been difficult to obtain — both the supply of flour and the kitchens and ovens to bake the bread were destroyed.

While food would be among the most important commodities, palmetto thatch to repair roofs would also have been in great demand.

In spite of the ferocity of the hurricane, the death toll appears to have been surprisingly low. The comisarios reported that only three men died in the storm, but the death toll may have been slightly higher since at least two children were listed as orphans, suggesting that their parents remained among the missing when the report was compiled.

All in all, the hurricane inflicted monetary damages totalling more than 65,000 pesos, while individual damage estimates ranged from thousands of pesos to a mere eight-peso loss for used clothing. In the end, the St. Augustine community recovered, and faced with even greater dangers the following year with the initiation of the Patriot War, the hurricane of 1811 faded from the city’s collective memory.
My wife and I had been in the Sarasota area for three days when I awoke one morning with the goal of photographing summer thunderstorms — particularly lightning.

After breakfast, we drove to St. Petersburg’s Fort De Soto State Park looking for an unobstructed view of developing storms. Later, we saw the beginnings of a thunderstorm near Bradenton Beach, so we headed there. By the time we arrived, the storm was centered southeast of Longboat Key. We arrived at Longboat Key marina just as the storm hit full force. Once it was safe, I began taking photos — but I didn’t like any of the resulting pictures.

Frustrated, we headed back to Sarasota. We arrived in Lido Key Beach about an hour before sunset and noticed the light interacting with the remnants of another storm to the south.

Shortly after sunset, I caught the picture you see here. The photo was shot with a Nikon D810 with a Nikon 14-24mm lens set at 24mm. The ISO was 100, aperture was f/16 and I took 5 bracketed shots ranging from .5 to 8 seconds. I processed the images in Photoshop, resulting in the final photograph.

Rob Rutan of Gainesville graduated from the University of Florida in 1977 with a bachelor of science degree in economics and a commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force, where he served as a pilot and a flight instructor. He has been a pilot for United Airlines since 1991, currently based in Newark, New Jersey. He and his wife started GBW Photography five years ago.

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