Florida through the eyes of its Writers, Artists, and Cultural Guides

Featuring Winners of the Florida Book Awards

ALSO: THE FLORIDA ARTIST WHO PAINTED WITH LIGHT
MIAMI’S ‘QUEEN OF CRIME’
FORGOTTEN COAST: CULTURE OF GRIT AND BEAUTY
The humanities are an essential pillar supporting both a free society and a free market. The study and discussion of literature, history, culture, philosophy, ethics, and like subjects are not academic fluff. They help us understand ourselves and each other, and in this time of extreme polarization, what could be more important? As our colleagues at the Ohio Humanities Council explain, the humanities introduce us to people we have never met, to places we have never visited, and to ideas that may never have crossed our minds.

Florida’s rich history and current prominence in writing excellence are highlighted in this issue. The legendary basketball coach, John Wooden, said of his own writing, “Good words, in good order, are good enough.” We hope you will enjoy the many examples of very “good words in good order” contained herein.

Finally, the long-time editor of FORUM, Barbara O’Reilley, is retiring after a distinguished career in journalism and here at the FHC. Her standards for factual accuracy and precise writing are the legacy she leaves, and dozens of FORUM editions are a testament to her skills. John Wooden would have liked Barbara. We certainly do. Godspeed.

Steve Seibert

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BY JON WILSON
A QUITESSENTIAL AMERICAN THEME weaves its way through this issue of FORUM. You’ll recognize it in the essay by writer Edna Buchanan, in the story about Florida’s “Forgotten Coast,” and in the profiles of this year’s Florida Book Award winners: Work to achieve your dreams and never give up, regardless of the odds.

Buchanan, recipient of the 2017 Florida Humanities Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, describes a tough, hardscrabble childhood in New Jersey, laboring at numerous blue-collar jobs, talking her way into a reporting position at a small Miami Beach newspaper, becoming a police reporter for the Miami Herald—and ultimately realizing her dream of writing novels.

The “Forgotten Coast” story features resilient people who figured out how to adapt to the bounty and brutalities of nature, make a living, and thrive. One of this year’s award-winning books, Saints of Old Florida, fills us in on the characters, the lore, the lifestyle, and even the recipes of this little-known stretch of the state along the northern Gulf.

By definition, the profiles of the 28 award-winning authors are stories of perseverance. Writers know all about working alone over long periods of time, sometimes being the only ones who believe they have something worthwhile to say, sometimes wondering if they really do.

This theme runs through our other stories, too: Learn how beloved Florida artist A.E. Backus captured the essence of Florida as paradise; how Gainesville became a training ground for great rock and roll bands; and how a Florida landfill inspired a renowned poet to write a masterpiece titled “Garbage.” Also, don’t miss our collection of insightful one-liners written about Florida.

Actually, the theme about striving to reach personal goals has special meaning for me. After 16 years as FORUM editor (has it really been that long?) I am retiring. And as I look forward to following some of my dreams and creating a new life not bound by office hours, I am also looking back on what an amazing opportunity this has been. I’ve had the intriguing task of looking beyond the stereotypes at colorful, dynamic, never-boring Florida and working with wonderful scholars, writers, and colleagues—always with the hope that we are helping to inform Floridians about their state. I trust that the next editor will be as fascinated as I have been.

It’s impossible to list all the highlights from this experience, but a few always come to mind: Interviewing Patrick Smith, author of the iconic Florida book A Land Remembered, and treasuring the memory of his phone call to tell me he loved the story; talking with Buffalo Tiger, who led his Miccosukee Tribe in its successful bid for U.S. recognition in 1962; learning from author Joe Akerman that America’s very first cowboys rode the wild Florida frontier (not the Wild West) and were called cowmen; and first hearing from my colleagues about the remarkable, independent thinker who was literary great Zora Neale Hurston.

Speaking of working toward a dream, here’s how Hurston described the philosophy passed down by her mother: “Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to ‘Jump at de sun.’ We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.”

BARBARA O’REILLEY is editor of FORUM.
Gilded Age Glory

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Plan Your Trip
EDNA BUCHANAN, a legendary Miami crime reporter and novelist, was named this year’s recipient of the Florida Humanities Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing.

A police reporter for the Miami Herald for 18 years, Buchanan won the Pulitzer Prize in 1986. She went on to write 18 books, including a fictional series about an intrepid Miami reporter, and nonfiction accounts that include her bestselling true-crime memoir, The Corpse Had a Familiar Face. The Los Angeles Times dubbed her the “queen of crime.”

Buchanan, 78, accepted the lifetime award April 13 at the annual luncheon honoring Florida Book Award winners, hosted by First Lady Ann Scott at the Governor’s Mansion. The article at right is based on her acceptance speech, which received a standing ovation.
How a hopeless kid from New Jersey became Miami’s ‘QUEEN OF CRIME’

BY EDNA BUCHANAN

At age four I told everyone I would write books when I grew up. I was hooked on the stories my mother read to me. When she became too busy, I wandered the neighborhood, book in hand, and asked strangers to read to me. They were all too busy, even the mailman. So I decided I had to learn to read. Fast.

My text books were the newspapers my father read for the race results. I’d carry them down the street and read news stories to my grandmother at her kitchen table. She could not read English and was always shocked by the content. We lived in north Jersey where I spent all my nickels on The New York Daily News, Mirror, and the Journal American. That is where I met the dark heroes of my childhood. Eagerly I followed the careers of Willie (the Actor) Sutton, the Babe Ruth of bank robbers; George Metesky, the mad bomber who terrorized New York; and Lucky Luciano, the man who organized the mob. Years later I interviewed two of them.

My goal: fiction. It was not easy. My mother was 17 when I was born. My father took off forever when I was seven. Nearsighted and clumsy, I didn’t mingle with other kids because my mom worked two jobs and I took care of everything else. I wore hand-me-downs that co-workers gave to my mother. I was laughed at, with good reason, and hated school.

An elementary school math teacher said—-in front of the entire class—that I’d be nothing, not even a good housewife, since I’d be unable to count my change at the supermarket or measure ingredients for a recipe. I was so humiliated, I never
forgot her words. But, recipes are not my strong suit, and I never count my change at the supermarket. I use credit cards.

Two gifts brightened my childhood: reading, and my 7th-grade English teacher, Mrs. Tunis. She said—in front of the entire class—that I could write, and asked the question that changed my life, forever. “Will you promise to dedicate a book to me someday?”

That triggered my 11-year-old mind, and I began trying to sell short stories to the Saturday Evening Post. I showed Mrs. Tunis my first rejection slip and asked why they didn’t buy my story. She explained that it would be the first of many rejections but that I should never, ever give up, because someday I would write books. She was right.

*The Corpse Had a Familiar Face*, published in 1987, was dedicated to Mrs. Tunis. She never knew. She died at 48, when I was in the 8th grade. But Mrs. Tunis is still alive to me and always will be.

We moved frequently, I changed schools often. The summer I was 12, I worked in a sweat shop, a coat factory where my mother operated a sewing machine. My job was to turn the long, fuzzy winter coats right side out after they’d been sewn together. Fuzz and lint swirled all around me. I’m convinced some of it still remains lodged in my nasal passages.

When my mom felt too exhausted to report to her midnight shift, I’d go instead. I worked in a candle factory and an all-night sandwich shop. No one objected. At 16, I was old enough to sell socks at Woolworth’s and baby clothes at W.T. Grant—and work as a telephone solicitor for a department store’s photo studio, selling parents on annual portraits of their growing children. I also worked at a dry cleaner’s shop and as the world’s worst waitress.

At 18, I became the youngest employee and union member at a Western Electric plant where I wired and soldered switchboards. What a gift to work with so many diverse and more experienced people, listen to their stories and share their lives! I learned far more about real life and human nature than anyone ever could in a classroom.

For my first week of paid vacation, I went to Miami Beach, took one look and burst into unexpected tears. The sudden revelation was an emotional experience! I’d been born in the wrong place! That is what was always wrong with me! But now, home at last, I’d left behind the gritty black-and-white newsreel that was my life and stepped into Technicolor and CinemaScope where my future waited.

I began to job-hunt, joined a creative writing class at a local college, and couldn’t-stop-writing. The words flowed like a wild, rushing stream. Someone suggested I be a reporter. Great idea, I thought: I can report the news by day and work on the great American novel at night! Little did I know that daily journalism is a whirlwind that leaves no time to read a book, much less write one. I called the *Miami Herald*, one of the nation’s best newspapers, to inquire about a job. The reply: “Unless you have a degree in journalism or five years’ experience on a daily newspaper—don’t bother.”

So I applied at the Sun, a small Miami Beach daily. The editor had me rewrite a press release, then asked if I had a journalism degree. “No.” Did I ever work for a newspaper? “No.” Did I write for my high school paper? What? My school had no newspaper. Had there been one, it would have needed an obit page. During my brief stint as a student, we buried half a dozen kids. My heart sank. Then he asked when I could start. “Now,” I said. He shook my hand heartily. “Congratulations! Now you’re a journalist!”
Isn’t there a lot more to it than that? I wondered. The pay was lousy, but I loved it! I learned how to make up and layout pages, set hot type, and read upside down—which came in handy later. The sole reporter for months on end, it was up to me to fill the paper each day. I interviewed Frank Sinatra, Joan Crawford, and Ray Milland; covered politics when Elliot Roosevelt was mayor; loved municipal court and the police beat; wrote a column; picked the horse and dog race winners for the sports department; wrote obits; covered tragedy, comedy, heroes; and sometimes, when no one else did, I wrote the Letters to the Editor. I started at 7 a.m. each day, often worked until 1 a.m., and learned to always fill my notebook with stories.

Once, at 2 a.m., hungry and exhausted, I slumped wearily over my typewriter. My editor waved his arms, cheered me on. “One more story! One more story!” I sighed, opened my notebook and found one more story. I interviewed intrepid senior citizens whom I grew to love, learned to shoot pictures to illustrate my stories, and always took more notes than necessary. I rewrote and sold some of those stories to magazines. What a fabulous education. And they paid me!

Five years later, it crashed. A politician bought the paper to promote himself, then sold it to a buyer who only wanted to eliminate competition. I’d need a job soon, and recalled the Herald’s chilly response years earlier. The paper was giant, but I knew the editors were aware that I existed because I’d won a number of press awards at the Sun, and they often assigned ace reporters to follow my stories. I plucked an editor’s name from the masthead and gave it a shot.

Editors love brevity. My letter was just four sentences: “Five years ago I called the Herald to apply for a job as a reporter. I was told not to bother unless I had a degree in journalism or five years’ experience on a daily paper. As of Aug. 14th, I have had five years’ experience at the Miami Beach Daily Sun. How about it?”

A day later my phone rang with an invitation to a series of tests and interviews, one of them with the Herald shrink. “Do you ever have any irresistible impulses you find difficult to control?” His voice had a peculiar edge. I had to give him something.

“Yes.” I averted my eyes.

He leaned forward, intense. “Tell me about it.” I sighed. “At least twice a week, I drive to a Dairy Queen for a Hawaiian Isle sundae with pineapple and coconut. I can’t help myself.” That was the best I could do on short notice. It was even true. Weeks went by. I heard nothing. The Sun building and presses were sold, the paper about to fold. The decision had been left to Herald City Editor Steve Rogers.

“Dear Mr. Rogers,” my new letter began. The remainder was just one word in the center of the page. “Obits?”

A day later, he called to ask when I could start. Heart pounding, I told him, then said goodbye. “Wait!” he cried. “Haven’t you forgotten something?” Bewildered, I had no clue. “Salary,” he said, “you haven’t asked me the salary!”

The Herald years were incredible. Who knew that the hopeless kid who’d lived in a rickety tenement, a rat-infested fire trap in Paterson, N.J., would go on to cover more than 5,000 violent deaths, 3,000 of them homicides—cover paradise lost, the cocaine cowboys, riots, and America’s highest murder rate. Or that some of my stories would result in changes to Florida law or that I would win the Pulitzer Prize, the George Polk award, and scores of others; or be invited to the White House by Laura Bush; or lecture at newspapers, colleges, and journalism schools, even Columbia; or be profiled in The New Yorker by writer Calvin Trillin.
In 1981, we broke all records with 637 murders. I covered them all. My editors were not pleased. They told me to cover only “the major murder of the day.” I understood, but pretended not to. How do you select the major murder of the day? Every murder is major to the victim. They all wanted to live as much as we do. We’re all in trouble when victims become mere statistics. I believed it was vital to report them all, all of their stories, in the newspaper of record, in black and white, where they would live in our consciousness forever.

Caught up in that whirlwind of violence, all I remember is going to murder scene after murder scene after murder scene. Numb and shell-shocked, I did it. I got them all in the newspaper.

My first trip to the morgue left me indignant, my consciousness raised by the plight of the downtrodden, the little guy pushed around, the victim of injustice. Death too soon at any age is an injustice. Who can be more downtrodden or pushed around than that? I wanted to know all their stories, what went wrong, why they were there.

I did things I never dreamed I could do—and never felt afraid, even when I should have. I was on a mission for the Herald, my deadline approaching like an avalanche. Nobody loves a police reporter. I’ve been threatened with arrest; had rocks thrown at me; guns pointed at me; and got threatening letters, subpoenas, and obscene phone calls—all of them from my editors.

When it was tough, I’d tell myself, “Mrs. Tunis said you could do it.” And then I did. If she hadn’t died young, if she were alive today, she probably wouldn’t remember me. But I remember her. And that’s what counts. In this vast tapestry that is life, some small thing we do, even a few words, can touch others, even change lives. The act of one person may resonate for years to come. We all can be somebody’s Mrs. Tunis.

I know now, more than ever, how lucky I was to be a journalist. There is something noble and exciting about venturing out each day to seek the truth.

The police beat is all about life and death and what makes people become heroes or homicidal maniacs. It’s all there: greed, sex, violence, comedy, and tragedy. Shakespeare in the raw. Every day I met Othello, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, or King Lear. On some bad days, I met them all. Sometimes you can reach out. One of the joys of journalism is that reporters are among the few people left in the world who can be catalysts for change, who can often bring about justice in cases where it would never triumph otherwise.

After the Pulitzer, I decided to pursue my goal since age 4 and write my novel. An editor at a major New York publishing house wanted me to write a book—a nonfiction account of covering crime in Miami. But I wanted to write a novel. He declined, and explained, “You have to have serious doubts when someone known for playing the violin suddenly announces plans to play the tuba.” But it wasn’t sudden! It was my lifelong goal. I persisted. Doubtfully, he compromised. I wrote the book he wanted, then my novel. At last! Exhilarated, I began, but struggled, kept turning to my notebook, but it wasn’t there. My heart sank. What if I couldn’t play this tuba? But then, something happened!

In the middle of Chapter Three my characters suddenly sprang to life, began to do things I never intended or even dreamed of. A few became aggressive—tried to take over the book. I had to promise one that he would return as a major character in a future novel. He became the dying detective in Miami, It’s Murder, which was nominated for an Edgar, as was the first novel. My characters still whisper in my ear, seek attention and demand to be heard.

Another reward for a life in journalism is your readers. They’d call, write, show up in the Herald newsroom, never fail to respond. Together, the good readers and I found missing persons; identified nameless, unclaimed corpses; brought home missing children; and helped solve many crimes! Half a million motivated readers can be far more effective than overwhelmed police. What a wonderful partnership! It’s similar with novels, minus the instant gratification. It takes longer and is lonelier.

But interacting with readers is pure joy.

Here are a few helpful thoughts for those who work at home alone, like me—and for everyone else as well. First, find your passion. Never give up the dream. Find your true home, the place where you belong. Learn everything you can about your passion. Never give up the dream. Find your true home, the place where you belong. Learn everything you can about the place where you belong. Learn everything you can about your passion. Never give up the dream.

Other insights gained over the years: There is no one better than a good cop and no one worse than a bad cop. Sometimes they are the same cop, even on the same day. Their chief problem is that they must be recruited from the human race.

Real news should mirror real life. Every life matters.

And, of course, the three cardinal rules for a writer: never trust an editor, never trust an editor, and never trust an editor.

As for me, I still love to write fiction. But I still feel more comfortable knocking on a stranger’s door to ask if he murdered his wife than I do making small talk at luncheons or parties with the literary set.

EDNA BUCHANAN, recipient of the 2017 Florida Humanities Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, is currently working on her 19th book.
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What’s Your Favorite Florida Line?

H ISTORIAN MICHAEL GANNON famously wrote, “By the time the Pilgrims came ashore at Plymouth, St. Augustine was up for urban renewal.” Gannon, beloved mentor of many Florida historians and the first recipient of the Florida Humanities Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, died in April 2017, at age 89.

As a way to honor Gannon and his way with words, historian Gary Mormino asked Floridians to send us their favorite Florida lines—written by a Florida writer, or describing Florida. “What sentence stirs your soul or makes you smile?” asked Mormino, the Florida Humanities Council Scholar in Residence.

We received a wonderfully eclectic mix of responses (some of them longer than one sentence). Here is a selection:

There are no other Everglades in the world.
—Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Everglades: River of Grass
Submitted by Michael Grunwald, journalist and author of The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise, and other books
and Sylvia Gurinsky

Sometimes I think I’ve figured out some order in the universe, but then I find myself in Florida, swamped by incongruity and paradox, and I have to start all over again.
—Susan Orlean, The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession
Submitted by DL Brown

You bring this many different kinds of people together it’s like throwing wolves and panthers into a pen full of cows. The fur never stops flying.
—Patrick Smith, A Land Remembered
Submitted by Crystal Drake

Here in Florida, the seasons move in and out like nuns in soft clothing, making no rustle in their passing.
—Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Cross Creek
Submitted by Betty Jean Steinshouer, actor and Rawlings scholar

Whether it be a storm across the Glades, the caress of a fresh breeze, or the silence of the deep woods, it has always been my desire to interpret the moods of nature.
—A.E. “Beanie” Backus, Tropical Light: The Art of A.E. Backus
Submitted by U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson

The Florida sun seems not so much a single ball overhead but a set of klieg lights that pursue you everywhere with an even white illumination.
—John Updike, Rabbit at Rest
Submitted by Sarah Gerard, author of Sunshine State: Essays, and other books

Usually it’s so quiet you can hear the strangler figs dropping their fruit on the hoods of parked cars, leaving pulp and tiny black seeds...The air all around the town limits is so thick that sometimes a soul cannot rise and instead attaches itself to a stranger, landing right between the shoulder blades with a thud that carries no more weight than a hummingbird.
—Alice Hoffman, Turtle Moon
Submitted by Tee Wood
Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by time.

—Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God
Submitted by Tom Lowe, author of A Murder of Crows, and other books and Jon Wilson, journalist, author

The state with the prettiest name, the state that floats in brackish water, held together by mangrove roots...

—Elizabeth Bishop, Florida
Submitted by Richard Blanco, former U.S. Poet Laureate

Two boomtime speculators were talking over their experiences. Said one, “The truth about Florida is a lie” and the other agreed, but added, “though it would be just as true the other way around.”

—F. Page Wilson, “Miami: From Frontier to Metropolis, An Appraisal”
Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida
Submitted by Craig Pittman, journalist, author of Oh, Florida!: How America's Weirdest State Influences the Rest of the Country, and other books

We weren't always The Joke State. We used to be The Sunshine State, known for our orange groves and beaches, and deceased senior citizens playing shuffleboard.

—Dave Barry, Best. State. Ever.: A Florida Man Defends His Homeland
Submitted by Barbara Davis

But Florida's star shines only with a secondary brilliance in that constellation of 38 which shimmer in the flag of the United States of America...As to its shape, it can be compared to a beaver's tail dropped in the ocean, between the Atlantic Ocean in the East and the Gulf of Mexico in the West.

—Jules Verne, Nord Contre Sud (1887), which appeared in English as Texar's Revenge
Submitted by Maurice O’Sullivan, scholar, author

Cows won't ever smell good like flowers. Someday you'll know that.

—Patrick D. Smith, A Land Remembered
Submitted by Rick Smith, son of Patrick Smith

In Florida the future relies on the uncertainties of weather and the unknown mettle of arriving strangers.

—Al Burt, Florida: Snowbirds, Sand Castles, and Self Rising Crackers
Submitted by T. Peak

The Darwinian Gardener surveyed his yard after Hurricane Charley and estimated the supplies required for a job this size. Easily, it would take four cigars and a six pack of an amber domestic beer; anything heavier might impede his progress.

—Mark Lane, Sandspurs: Notes from a Coastal Columnist
Submitted by Jay Cortright
Who owns Cross Creek?
The red-birds, I think, more than I,
for they will have their nests even in the face
of delinquent mortgages.

—Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Cross Creek
Submitted by Jeff Klinkenberg, journalist, author of Alligators in B-Flat: Improbable Tales from the Files of Real Florida, and other books

My father, King Phillip, told me I was made of the sands of Florida, and that when I was placed in the ground, the Seminoles would dance and sing around my grave.

—Coacoochee, also known as Wildcat, We Come for Good: Archaeology and Tribal Historic Preservation at the Seminole Tribe of Florida (Edited by Paul N. Backhouse, Brent R. Wiseman, and Mary Beth Rosebrough)
Submitted by Tara Backhouse

How is the mind agitated and bewildered, at being thus, as it were, placed on the borders of a new world!

—William Bartram, Travels
Submitted by Greg Cunningham

A prosthetic leg with a Willie Nelson bumper sticker washed ashore on the beach, which meant it was Florida.

—Tim Dorsey, Pineapple Grenade
Submitted by David Kirby, scholar, author, and recipient of 2016 Florida Humanities Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing

He said weakly, “Where did it all go, Pappa? Where?”

—Patrick D. Smith, A Land Remembered
Submitted by Jean Faulk

Florida has a visual brilliance that can be accessed only one small section at a time.

—Randy Wayne White, in forward to Seasons of Real Florida by Jeff Klinkenberg
Submitted by Lisa Unger, author of The Red Hunter, and other books

We need above all, I think, a certain remoteness from urban confusion, and while this can be found in other places, Cross Creek offers it with such beauty and grace that once entangled with it, no other place seems possible to us, just as when truly in love none other offers the comfort of the beloved.

—Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Cross Creek
Submitted by Florence Turcotte, archivist, Rawlings scholar

Do not tell me Florida is no longer a paradise.

—Jeff Klinkenberg, Son of Real Florida
Submitted by Cynthia Barnett, journalist, scholar, author of Rain: A Natural and Cultural History and other books

It seems to me that the earth may be borrowed but not bought. It may be used, but not owned.

—Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Cross Creek
Submitted by Karen Smoke

Unlike the deeds of Julia Tuttle, Henry Flagler, or George Merrick, no single individual stamped his or her identity on Miami in the 1940s or 1950s; rather, Pearl Harbor set off a chain reaction of events, unleashing vast forces which shaped and reshaped South Florida.

Submitted by Paul George, Miami historian, author
MEET CAPTAIN CARL (Raffield), a lifelong fisherman who grew up on Crooked Island in the early 1900s and modeled a can-do attitude for his family as they built one of the largest seafood businesses in the Southeast.

And Aunt Mag (Margaret Winifred Buzzett), a tiny, formidable woman born in 1882 in Apalachicola. She had many suitors but opted to be a business woman—running a successful grocery store (Miss Buzzett’s Fancy Groceries) and working as the purser for a steamship—long before women had careers.

And James Cain, an ex-juke joint brawler known for tonging Gulf oysters for 60 years and always wearing Gucci knock-off shoes.

These are just a few of the characters who inhabit a new book celebrating the culture of “The Forgotten Coast,” a stretch of Florida along the Gulf that starts at the bend and goes west to the Panhandle. The book, Saints of Old Florida, is part scrapbook and photo album, part storybook and history, and part recipe box and family memoir that is a labor of love by three local women—Emily Raffield, Melissa Farrell, and Christina McDermott.

“It was a heart project through and through,” said Raffield, 29, a fifth-generation Floridian whose family owns the business started by Captain Carl. A Florida State University graduate in marketing, Raffield tried the corporate world in Atlanta but returned home, saying, “I needed the ocean back in my life.”

Her home, Port St. Joe, is one of the “saints” of the book’s title—several towns along the coast: St. Joseph (a bayside community that includes Port St. Joe), St. Vincent, St. George, St. Teresa, and St. Marks. The self-published, 252-page oversized, well-illustrated book won a silver medal in this year’s Florida Book Awards.

“The title came like an epiphany,” said co-author Farrell, 49. “Not only to encompass the ‘saint’ towns from St. Marks to St. Joseph, but also symbolic of the reverence for the things we love about this coast.” Originally from Thomasville, Georgia, Farrell vacationed with her family in...
St. Teresa for years. In 2000, she settled in Port St. Joe and opened Joseph’s Cottage, a lifestyle store selling home décor, furniture, jewelry, clothing, and locally made goods.

She credits McDermott, the third co-author, with originating the idea for the book. McDermott, 67, moved to Port St. Joe when she retired from teaching elementary school in Atlanta. McDermott recalls her many visits to the area and how she couldn’t wait to get out the door on Friday afternoons to hit the road to the Florida coast. “I would go as fast as I could and never stopped,” until she could take that first deep breath of sea air, she said. “Those drives gave me a nose for delicious, salty, ocean breezes.”

After mulling over the idea for the book, the three women decided to draw on the memories and talents of numerous other locals along the coast and create a multifaceted look at the culture and what it took people over the years to survive and thrive there.

“Life in North Florida is not for folks who lack grit,” Raffield writes. “The individuals who have made their livelihoods along this coast are inventive, persistent, and industrious—for that’s the only way to last in this part of the world. It takes heading down the path with a sharp machete, cutting away brush to walk and pruning along the way.”

Nothing illustrates this better than the story told by Ms. Betty (McNeill), a member of one of the founding families of Indian Pass, settled during the state’s turpentine boom in the early 1900s. The McNeill family started out in the business of making turpentine (with resin tapped from pine trees), then, in the mid-20th century, opened an oyster-shucking house and developed a seafood business, employing 40 local families. In 1985, after Hurricane Kate wiped out the family’s oyster leases, they started a raw bar and restaurant. “Everything kind of evolves and has a way of working out,” Ms. Betty said. “You just have to have patience and use your imagination sometimes.”

Other families involved in oyster shucking and seafood along the coast include Buddy Ward & Sons, who have been in the business for three generations. Their 13 Mile Brand has earned a national reputation for high quality Apalachicola oysters. The family currently is working hard to preserve oyster beds and maintain quality in the face of ongoing threats to the industry, caused in part by the decline of freshwater flow from the rivers into the bay.

The book also features special historic places, like the 19th-century homes of Apalachicola—known in the past as a river port town on the Gulf that shipped cotton, timber, salt,
fruit, spirits, iron, and turpentine to U.S. and international destinations. “Each home tells its own story. If walls could talk they would give accounts of suspense, romance, and fiction,” the authors write.

Several contributors to the book describe the joys of staying in Old Florida-style beach houses during summers when they were growing up. “When I think back on a childhood of summers spent here, I see the beach through cheap plastic sunglasses, and my memories resemble a vintage film reel,” writes Natalie Bristol Kirbo. “When we grew tired of shell hunting and critter catching, creating ‘dribble-drop’ castles of wet sand was a favorite pastime. We would boogie board in the canal down the beach until our skin was raw, then throw on a tee shirt and keep going. Oh, to have that level of dedication and energy now.”

Food plays a big part in the local culture—and in this book—from the story of harvesting Tupelo honey along the banks of the Apalachicola River (a specialty of the beekeeping Lanier family) to accounts of inventing delicious local dishes. A sampling of some of the book’s recipes: Captain Carl’s Baked Red Snapper (in a rich tomato roux), Dunworryn Bloody Mary, Camp Palms Shrimp and Grits, Rosemary Scones with Citrus Tupelo Butter, George’s Date Nut Bars, Smoked Mullet Tamales, Rock Landing Deviled Crabs, Mockingbird cocktail (ingredients include Jamaican rum, Tupelo honey, and cardamom), mustard dipping sauce for stone crabs, and even Saints of Old Florida Savory Tomato Pie (an attempt to duplicate the tomato pie recipe closely guarded at the popular family-owned Spring Creek Restaurant).

In an essay, Leo Lovel, commercial fisherman and owner of Spring Creek Restaurant in St. Marks, articulates an important aspect of the local culture. Titled “Seein’ Myself,” the essay is excerpted from Spring Creek Chronicles. “I got to see myself from a distance once,” he writes: his own silhouette, black “against the orange-pink, pre-dawn sky,” standing on the short bow of a wooden skiff. “Cap pulled low, facing north, looking in the channel for mullet to jump...same slicker, same boots, same stance, even leans against the motor the way I do...the boat just like mine, the net stacked the same, fishing the same waters I fish.

“Then I knew who it was. It was Ben, my son. It was me at a distance.” His son Ben was already a fisherman on his own, with his own boat and gear and knowledge and confidence, which Lovel said made him proud. But the experience of seeing himself in his son was profound, he writes. “It showed me how cultures continue. How much influence we have on our children. How love of a lifestyle of adventure and challenge can be passed on.”

BARBARA O’REILLEY is editor of FORUM. JON WILSON is a frequent contributor to the magazine.
CONTEMPLATING THE END of his teaching career in the 1990s, the renowned poet A. R. (Archie) Ammons realized that he had “an unaccomplished mission unaccomplished.” That might seem odd for a writer who had received almost every award available to American poets, from a National Book Award in 1973 and the Robert Frost Medal to fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He had even been the first person named as a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, the famously enigmatic Genius Award, when it was established in 1981. So, what could he do for his last chapter, his final movement, his fifth act?

As retirement loomed, friends died, and an awareness of aging settled in—“I can’t believe / I’m merely an old person”—Ammons began searching for a symbol, an image, a metaphor that could embody his life, his work, his fears, and his hopes. A writer who prized the kind of authentic American language and imagery that his heroes Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams had championed, he knew that Romantic conceits like “striking mountaintops” and even the once mighty maple in his yard would not do.

Archie Ammons finally found his answer while driving down by I-95 in Florida where flatland’s ocean- and gulf-flat, mounds of disposal rise (for if you dug something up to make room for something to put in, what about the something dug up as with graves:)

That vision became the inspiration and provocative title for what many see as his masterpiece: Garbage (W.W. Norton, 1993). In its 108 pages of playful, anecdotal, philosophical, autobiographical, and scatological couplets, Ammons celebrates life—all life from “my cousins the robins” to the earthworms they feed on—and its creations, from poems and memories to “a crippled plastic chair” and bodily waste. Like any expanding and mutating landfill, each of us is a constantly growing, steadily evolving jumble of language and ideas, experiences and possessions, an “interclustering of formations” with all their “internal mingling.”

Throughout his poem, the landfill serves as a “strange mirror” of our world and our lives. In the second section of what will be an 18-section poem, he introduces us to the tangle of comic and serious, spiritual and realistic, ancient and modern that fills his work when he describes garbage trucks crawling “as if in obeisance / as if up ziggurats towards the high places.” When one truck in this modern religious procession reaches the summit, Ammons suggests a kind of spiritual epiphany as its driver

looks off from the high point into the rosy-fine rising of the day, the air pure, the wings of the birds white and clean as angel-food cake: holy, holy, holy the driver cries and flicks his cigarette

in a spiritual swoop that floats and floats before It touches ground.

Whenever his work threatens to become too serious, Ammons invariably adds a spiritually swooping cigarette. That antipodal touch appears throughout the poem. After praising the value of spirited dialogue, for example, he calls us back to reality with an impish simile: “argument is like dining / mess with a nice dinner long enough, it’s garbage.”

As his image of the “rosy-fine / rising of the day” suggests, part of the poet’s own cultural and intellectual landfill is a lifetime of literature. After all, in the poet’s mind dead language is hauled off to, and burned down on, the energy held and shaped into new turns and clusters, the mind strengthened by what it strengthens.

Ammons has done precisely that in hauling off and re-shaping one of Homer’s most famous epithets, the “rosy-fingered dawn.” Throughout the poem he takes a whimsical pleasure in playing with and altering images and language from Dante and T.S. Elliot to commercial press releases and Newtonian physics.

At its heart Garbage is a profoundly spiritual poem. The garbage truck driver’s words echo the “Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus” sung at the most sacred moment of the Roman Catholic mass, just before the consecration of
image into his larger vision of transformative interconnections by pointing out, with an inevitable pun, that “celestial / garbage is so far the highest evidence of our / existence here.”

Playing with ideas and language, Ammons accepts the paradoxes and contradictions of modern life. Our deepest insights often come too late and our greatest achievements create equally great challenges like the massive landfills looming over our highways. Unlike the civic boosters and public relations firms who prefer disguising such paradoxes—remember that after its Broward County neighbors nicknamed a notoriously malodorous landfill Mount Trashmore, the corporation that owned it officially renamed it the Monarch Hill Renewable Energy Park—Ammons refuses to ignore the centrality, challenge, beauty, or value of garbage in our lives. And he recognizes the interconnection of it all by writing his poem as a single sentence.

When Garbage earned Archie Ammons his second National Book Award in 1993, the citation noted that for “power of the thought and language, the poem takes its place alongside Whitman’s Song of Myself—an American classic.” Whitman’s sprawling epic perfectly captured American life in the late 19th century as a vast, diverse nation struggled to define itself. Ammons’s profoundly playful meditation on aging seems equally appropriate to our time not only for a state with the nation’s highest percentage of seniors but for a country attempting to balance materialism and spirituality, language and meaning, self and society, the old and the new.

Maurice J. O’Sullivan, an award-winning teacher, writer, and filmmaker, is professor of English and Kenneth Curry Chair of Literature at Rollins College in Winter Park.
We mourn the passing of beloved Brian Dassler

Florida Humanities Board member Brian Dassler, a “public education superstar,” died suddenly on March 21 in Tallahassee of natural causes. He was 38.

Dassler, deputy chancellor of educator quality for the Florida Department of Education, was known as a dear friend to many and for his dedication to helping students achieve success against the odds.

Teen and teacher camps advance understanding of water issues

Florida high school students and K–12 teachers explored our state’s relationship with water last June during weeklong workshops sponsored by the Florida Humanities Council and the University of Florida. Twenty-eight students and 33 teachers from around the state participated in separate residential programs on the UF campus, where they learned in classrooms and on field trips about Florida’s ecosystems and how the humanities and sciences can work together to examine issues related to climate and water.

This was the third year of our humanities partnership with UF for the student camps and the second year for the teacher program. Organized with UF’s Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere, Center for Precollegiate Education and Training, and College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the programs were coordinated by Sophia Acord of the humanities center and Steve Noll of UF’s history department.

Bring poetry to your school

Teachers, bring poetry into your classroom and potential scholarship money to your students through the Poetry Out Loud national recitation contest. This program, which we bring to Florida each year, is sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation. It provides comprehensive poetry curriculum to high school teachers and involves school-wide recitation contests. Each school winner competes in state finals held in Tampa each spring. The statewide winner receives an all-expense paid trip to Washington D.C. to represent Florida at the national finals and compete for the top prize of a $20,000 scholarship.

More than 11,000 Florida students participated in Poetry Out Loud during the 2016–2017 school year; 48 represented their schools at the state competition. Alexis Schuster of Winter Park High School was crowned as Florida’s winner and represented our state at the national finals. She did not win the national prize, but she and her parents and grandparents enjoyed their first trip to the nation’s capital. Visit www.FloridaHumanities.org/Poetry for more information on the program or to get your school involved.

In addition to learning at libraries, archives, museums, and lecture halls, the students took field trips canoeing down the Santa Fe River to Blue Springs and to the area around Cedar Key where they learned about Native American relationships with land and water and explored issues related to the 1923 Rosewood Massacre (the racially motivated destruction of a black town).

The teachers delved into ways they could examine water and climate topics in their classrooms. In addition to participating in discussions and hearing lectures from experts, the teachers also took canoe trips and spent time at UF’s Austin Cary Forest, learning how to measure tree heights and issues related to turpentine production. They also spent a day on the Gulf Coast, visiting Yankeetown Salt Marsh, Shell Mound with its Paleo-Indian remains, and the UF Marine Lab on Seahorse Key.

Teachers on a field trip exploring the salt marsh in Yankeetown.

Alexis Schuster, Florida champ, recites at the Poetry Out Loud competition.

Students canoeing on the Santa Fe River.
Stroll through history in your town

We are currently looking for partners who want to bring our cultural history walking tours to their local communities—through our “Florida Stories” phone app. Now you can apply to bring this program to your town or city—enabling residents and visitors to learn more about local heritage at their own pace and on their own schedule. Deadlines to apply are: Nov 3, 2017 and March 2, 2018.

“Florida Stories” walking tours are already available for these communities: Bartow, Lake Wales, Pensacola, DeLand, St. Augustine (Colonial Tour and Gilded Age Tour), Tampa’s Ybor City, Key West, Fort Pierce, Tarpon Springs, and Fernandina Beach. Launching this fall are tours for Ormond Beach, Tallahassee, and St. Petersburg. Special black history tours will launch in January and February 2018 for Lincolnville in St. Augustine, Lincoln Park in Fort Pierce, and Virginia Key.

Learn more about the “Florida Stories” app—and how to bring this to your town—at FloridaHumanities.org/FloridaStories.

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*Florida Portfolio II*

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Hardcover, 120 pages
Window of the Eye, Inc. 2011

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DURING HIS LIFETIME, the Florida media proclaimed A.E. Backus (1906-1990) Florida’s painter laureate, the Dean of Florida’s landscape painters, and “the single most important Florida landscape artist.” By 1970, an art critic put Backus’s popularity “somewhere in the category of Motherhood-Virtue-and the Constitution.”

Art enthusiasts dubbed Backus “the father of the visual arts from Melbourne to Jupiter,” Florida, yet his friends and neighbors said that “they didn’t know if he was the greatest painter that ever was, or if he was a genius, but they knew he was an extraordinary person.” A close friend observed:

[Backus] is a man who is an artist not only by profession but an artist in living...a spiritual man...who has the courage to be firm when necessary, yet is always tender...who understands and loves, but rarely passes judgment...[who] puts himself last and everyone else ahead.

Born and raised in Fort Pierce, Florida, Backus always identified himself as a Cracker, a hardy and persevering early Florida pioneer so closely tied to the land that its very terrain and vegetation were part of his soul. He began painting while still “a little-bitty kid,” depicting anything that caught his young eye, including the flora and fauna, water and sky that he observed daily around him. Years later, he would translate this early attention to the natural world into advice for aspiring artists: “Get out and work from nature—God is the best
teacher." The Indian River, St. Lucie River, Atlantic Ocean, and the St. Lucie County savannas and backcountry were the frequent stomping grounds of Backus’s youth. There he gradually learned firsthand the nuances of Florida’s landscape, developing an exceptional visual memory as he matured into an amateur naturalist and professional artist.

His knowledge of painting was primarily shaped by observation—not formal training, which he found both geographically and economically inaccessible. Asserting that he mainly “learned by doing,” Backus studied his natural environment and the works of other artists in books, magazines, galleries, and museums. Though he always acknowledged that formal training was an asset, he considered artistic talent more of a natural gift than an acquired skill:

If you go to art museums you can see how other people did certain things and try to analyze why they did it. It’s faster if you have lessons and take advantage of someone else’s experience. The only reason I didn’t get more schooling was because it was economically impossible.

He managed to attend New York’s Parsons School of Design for two consecutive summers in 1924 and 1925 to study commercial art, his only formal art training at an art school and an attempt to develop a more pragmatic outlet for his artistic talents.

Upon his return to Fort Pierce and under the influence of the Ashcan school of artists he had encountered in New York, the paint application in Backus’s compositions became heavier and his brush strokes more spontaneous, rapid, and broken. This new stylistic path led to the most significant stylistic development in his career and defined his most successful paintings seen in the late 1940s and 1950s: the avant-garde application of paint to an entire canvas with a palette knife instead of a brush, giving his compositions an improvisational, gestural appearance.

What happened was I had one of these regular old [flat] painting knives that you use to scrape with, and I thought, well, I’m just going to whack this paint in with this thing... so Doug Austin made me a palette knife out of a surveyor’s chain...I started using that. Several years after that, they started making painting knives because there were other people, I guess, who had the same idea. With me it was just an accident. I used the palette knife exclusively for a while.

Simultaneously, the artistic portrayal of light became Backus’s holy grail: how light defined objects; how it affected their color; and how it differed from hour to hour, day to day, season to season, and place to place. He turned his attention to the Impressionists and Claude Monet in particular. Backus
admired Monet’s compositions, the brilliance of his colors, and his portrayal of light: “I think he painted light better than any other painter.” Eventually, Backus would come to describe his own artistic roots as “part Cracker and part Monet.” By the mid-1930s, Backus’s land- and seascapes showed the beginnings of a distinct personal style.

I try to suggest rather than delineate, working with a lot of pure color and effects of light...Whether it be a storm across the Glades, the caress of a fresh breeze, or the silence of the deep woods, it has always been my desire to interpret the moods of nature.

My paintings are representational but by no means photographic. If you try to put everything in a picture that you see in a scene, the picture becomes too detailed, too busy, uninteresting. I edit a scene just as a writer edits a story, cutting out the unimportant things, leaving in the colorful, mood-creating or dramatic things.

Subsequently, Backus’s stylistic development can be broadly described as more and more accurate representations of light and atmosphere, a slow technical change from more and more refined palette-knife depictions to mainly brushwork, and a gradual shift in subject matter from mainly coastal scenes to more inland scapes.

Following WW II, Backus established a combination home and art studio at the mouth of Moore’s Creek on the Indian River. The former site of the Backus boat works, his family’s business, it consisted of a number of detached, shed-like buildings, which Backus interconnected to form what became known as the Old Studio. Likened by the locals to the atmosphere of Paris’s Left Bank or New York’s Greenwich Village, the Old Studio was the scene of a 24-hour-a-day bohemian open house. The door was always unlocked, and anyone was welcome at any time. As Backus explained, “Let in the people and they’ll keep out the thieves. It’s my life style that anyone interested can come in and go out.” He further elaborated, “I like to work with people around me, although I prefer that they talk to one another instead of talking to me...I’ve got to be human to work. It takes a lot of energy to dislike people. And if you start disliking people, you soon find that they’ve got more time and more energy to dislike you than you’ve got the time and energy to dislike them.”

A frequent Old Studio visitor described Backus at work: “There was no aura of artistic silence or subjective creative atmosphere. Backus talked and painted, visited and painted, discussed and painted, argued and painted.” What did he argue about? “Any damn thing, as long as it’s not personal.” Backus liked a lively debate and was quoted as saying, “There’s nothing more boring than an afternoon of pleasant conversation.” Well-read, informed, and engaging, Backus could speak intelligently, with
wit and humor on any subject. He was a skilled mimic. Able to adapt deftly to varying social and professional situations, Backus could fashion a good story or relevant counsel for every occasion.

A motley crew of young and old visitors gathered daily at the Old Studio. They engaged in passionate discussions on a multitude of topics, including current events; listened to jazz, especially Duke Ellington; ate meals usually prepared by Backus; drank; danced; played chess; and took part in musical jam sessions. "There was always work in progress, and people stopping by to kibbitz with Beanie [Backus's nickname] while he was painting. Every eccentric in the state would eventually pass over his doorstep, staying for dinner that was always washed down with rum and water."

In the segregated Jim Crow South of the 1950s, Backus’s studio was the only place in Fort Pierce where blacks and whites mixed socially and artistically, the African-American artists known as the Highwaymen becoming Backus’s most conspicuous mentoring legacy. As recounted by a frequent local studio visitor, Backus habitually “took in strays, you might say, artists who were down and out, young people interested in art. Sometimes there would be five, six people sleeping there; you never knew who you would find. I’d be in there sitting between a ship captain and a governor and a wino. That was a daily occurrence.” Backus’s social conduct impacted the local community, influencing “an awful lot of rednecks into being a gentler, kinder bunch of people.”

In 1956 Backus visited Jamaica and fell in love with its beautiful scenery and friendly people. It reminded him of “how old Florida [used to be],” thinking he might retire there someday. He built a studio near the mouth of the Priestman’s River, 10 miles east of Port Antonio on the island’s northeast coast. It became his spiritual and creative getaway, his favorite place to paint, especially when endless commissions began to dictate and constrain his Florida compositions.

*Live Oak Along the Water*, dated 1970, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in., Vartanian Collection
He depicted much of the area’s scenery and people. In later years he claimed, “I moved to Jamaica for the rum, the painting was secondary.”

In 1960 Backus relocated his Fort Pierce studio-home up the block and across the street to a two-story Victorian house, which appropriately became known as the New Studio. The cheerful chaos and bohemian atmosphere of the Old Studio was also transplanted to the new location. It was here that Backus’s style began to move away from palette knife rendering towards more and more brush execution.

Failing eyesight forced Backus to undergo cataract surgery on both his eyes in late 1966. Following the surgery, his paintings became firmly rooted in a new style that had begun to evolve in the early 1960s. He abandoned his earlier heavy impasto, expressive palette-knife style for more and more detailed, nuanced, and polished brushwork depicting quiet inland scenes. Though still based on acute observation of light and atmospheric fluctuations, his landscapes now convey a serene, detached, contemplative mood through more cerebral and idealized, almost surreal, compositions in which nature’s forms are openly rearranged and redesigned for greater aesthetic appeal. Backus explained, “I do what Nature would have done, had She had the time.”

Backus’s age—he was already over 60 in 1970—and the repercussions of his cataract surgery were the primary reasons for the new stylistic shift. Following the removal of cataracts, his eyes became extremely sensitive to light. After spending an entire day painting outdoors using a palette knife, the next day he saw everything through a pink veil. Fearing he would lose his eyesight, he stopped painting outdoors. The eye operation also enabled Backus to see new detail and color nuances that he now wanted to incorporate into his paintings. Painting outdoors with a palette knife was physically and mentally strenuous because it demanded execution basically in one sitting, with little margin for error, as later alterations and corrections were difficult. Working indoors with a brush, Backus was able to take his time and easily make necessary changes. Whereas the palette-knife work conveyed a sense of immediacy and improvisation, his brushwork conveyed the calm sedentary environment of an indoor studio. Backus explained, “I do what Nature would have done, had She had the time.”

The avalanche of private and public commissions Backus received (by 1986, there was a three-year waiting list for his paintings) also made the faster drying brush paintings more feasible. So popular, in fact, Backus’s paintings had become that, when he showed at Miami’s Museum of Science annual fund-raising art exhibition during the 1970s, potential buyers had to draw lots for a chance to buy one of his paintings. Likewise at other annual art shows during the 1980s, people only had a chance to buy an exhibited Backus painting if their name was pulled out of a fishbowl crammed with potential buyer’s names.

In 1979 Florida Gov. Bob Graham named Backus “the best-known representational artist in the state.” In June 1980 Backus received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton for his contribution to the arts. His reaction: “It’s kind of funny for someone who never graduated from high school.” As his health declined primarily due to years of heavy drinking, Backus’s health declined primarily due to years of heavy drinking. He died in 1990 following his fifth heart attack. According to his wishes, there was no funeral, only a mobbed wake in the form of “a good, old-fashioned Beanie party.” Also according to his wishes, he was cremated and his ashes were scattered from a plane over the Adams Ranch in St. Lucie County. Owner Bud Adams described the scene: “It was overcast, a dark, dirty-looking day. And almost immediately after they scattered the ashes, the sun came out and this rainbow appeared. It was almost eerie.”

In 1993 Backus was posthumously inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame. With their aesthetic appeal and ability to provoke greater insight into and appreciation of America’s tropical peninsula, Backus’s paintings have become the definitive images of a pristine and verdant Florida. So expertly did Backus capture the essence of this unspoiled territory that his paintings have become synonymous with the state: backcountry terrain is described as Backus landscape, emotive clouds as Backus sky, and translucent waves as Backus water. As more and more of the state’s wilderness disappears, his works have also emerged as poetic testaments to Florida’s lost paradise.

NATASHA KUZMANOVIC, author of Topical Light: The Art of A.E. Backus, is profiled on page 30.
O EXACTLY HOW did this small American city manage to fly under the cultural radar while steadily encouraging the careers of such a large number of successful rock and pop musicians and songwriters?

If we consider just two rock bands with Gainesville musicians—the Eagles, and Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers—the total of records sold is in the hundreds of millions. Add albums by Sister Hazel, the Motels, Stan Bush, Less Than Jake, Against Me!, and Hot Water Music, and the total is—well, even bigger, with every sign of more music to come.

The rapid growth of the local music scene that began in Gainesville in the mid-sixties is directly traceable to the success of the Beatles, a yet-to-be-surpassed example of what a rock and roll band could be, a self-contained musical ensemble whose artistic interactions brought out the best talents of every member. The Beatles’ music certainly had an impact, but of equal importance to the specific songs was the attitude of artistic freedom and growth the band embodied. The Beatles showed us that you could write a song about practically anything—holding hands, taking LSD, a yellow submarine...

The band culture developed in Gainesville naturally, through how easy it was to start or join a band, learn to play music, and earn money playing, all while still in high school. You were a teenager with a novel job—a working musician playing dance music, a time-honored role that has existed through the centuries...

Musically, Gainesville’s proximity to the borders of Georgia and Alabama has influenced the city’s musical identity more so than the lower regions of Florida. Of course, rock and roll is a product of the South. With the notable exceptions of Chuck Berry from the Midwest and Buddy Holly from western Texas, a majority of the early pioneers of rock and roll were from the South...

A major source of Gainesville’s rock and roll music culture can be directly traced to the University of Florida and all that it brought to the region... The presence and consistent growth of the university eventually made Gainesville into a vibrant college town teeming with students who—when not attending classes and studying—were actively looking for fun in the sun, and music was commonly part of that fun. Businesses sprang up in support, including every place that presented live music, music and record stores, and FM and AM radio stations. Recreational drugs were readily available, and a vast underground economy was generated through the growing and selling of local marijuana that may in fact continue to this day. Even as late as the eighties, truckers often referred to Gainesville as “the hippie city” on their citizen-band radios as they drove past on 1-75.

On a more intellectual note, the university’s steady growth transformed the city into a regional center of learning and continued to attract faculty from around the...
world, including those who brought families with musically oriented kids who found themselves freshly arrived in a city that practically dared them to start or join a band. Among the children of university faculty members were future members of the Eagles, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, the Motels, and Sister Hazel. The presence of the university made Gainesville a cosmopolitan city of the South...

If we examine the songs of bands with Gainesville musicians as members, it seems evident that the city’s musical identity was informed to the greatest extent by pop music and the influence of Top Forty songs. In the sixties and seventies a cover band’s job was to play the hits, the familiar songs... With all these bands playing many of the same songs, a musical community built around a common goal, and the pursuit of similar musical skills made the Gainesville musician a member of a large group of peers. The main issue was quality, being good. There were plenty of examples of good players in town, and by watching and listening to a top regional band such as the Tropics, Mouse and the Boys, the Nation Rocking Shadows, or Ron and the Starfires, you knew what good looked like and what good sounded like. These players were the midland Florida rock stars of their time and place, universally respected examples of excellence. This exposure to hearing a well crafted pop song played with skill was a strong presence in the Gainesville musical community...

The true content of music is emotional expression, and music embodies the feelings of all races and expresses universally held emotions. Gainesville has some native African-American rhythm and blues, gospel, blues, and funk in its musical roots, a trait not evident in the music of every southern college town...

Another aspect that worked in Gainesville’s favor was its relative isolation, a city located in a region of Florida unrelated to the tourist trade, partly because of its being almost precisely between the two coastlines. This isolation led to a core of players interacting for longer periods of time in comparison to those in larger cities that might offer a broader choice of players and musical genres, and it helped create a do-it-yourself culture in Gainesville that remains in place today...For a musician, Gainesville was too small of a scene to “cool guy” your way through...You could either play or you couldn’t, and a certain amount of southern pride figured into it. Once you had heard Duane Allman play, either on record or live, the facts of the matter were clear: This is what virtuoso musicianship sounded like...

There it is, hidden in the deepest corner of the South: Gainesville, Florida. Diverse. Geographically isolated. Southern, yet liberal and relatively progressive in politics, with a long tradition of supporting music. A city with equal parts higher education and hedonistic behavior. These are some of the aspects of Gainesville that helped make the city an ideal breeding ground for musicians. As a result, the city has produced some of the greatest rock and roll songwriters and musicians of our time.

This article is excerpted from Music Everywhere: The Rock and Roll Roots of a Southern Town, by Marty Jourard. For information about Jourard, see page 30.
Tales of Yesterday's Florida Keys
John Viele
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**YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE**

**Wendy Mills**

Gold Medal, Young Adult Literature—*All We Have Left*

When Wendy Mills was a schoolgirl, her friends began making fun of her for acting out the stories she carried in her head. So she started writing them down. Her first book was 30 pages long and was about alien flying horses tempting a brother and sister to leave earth and fly away with them.

“It was great, it was awful, I was 12 years old,” Mills writes on her website. Funny thing. Her pals who had laughed at her loved the story, and their reactions encouraged her to keep on writing—poetry, soap operas, plays, mysteries, and whatever else popped into her head.

*All We Have Left* tells a dramatic story about heartbreak and hope. It interweaves the stories of two 16-year-old girls, one of whom lost a brother in the 9-11 attacks, the other a Muslim who was trapped in one of the Twin Towers. The *School Library Journal* called it a “touching look at a national tragedy [that] promotes healing and understanding.” Mills lives with her family on an island off Florida’s southwest coast.

**Lauren Gibaldi**

Silver Medal, Young Adult Literature—*Autofocus*

Which of these occupations doesn’t fit with the others: Public librarian, circus aerialist, high school teacher, magazine editor, and bookseller?

Lauren Gibaldi has all of these on her résumé. Yes, this writer performed with Florida State University’s Flying High Circus, doing such acrobatics as Hanging Perch, Mexican Cloud Swing, Rolla Rolla, and Spanish Web. And she did them with zero gymnastics training.

*Autofocus* takes Maude, a high school senior, on a quest to find her birth mother. Lots of people wonder if it reflects Gibaldi’s past, but it does not, she said.

“The story came from me wanting to write about a girl going to Tallahassee and finding something. That turned into finding someone. And that turned into her birth mother,” said Gibaldi, who lives in Orlando with her husband and daughter.

**Stacie Ramey**

Bronze Medal, Young Adult Literature—*The Homecoming*

As is the case with many writers, Stacie Ramey didn’t know what she wanted to be when she grew up. “I was a clap-from-the-sidelines kind of girl. The first person to say they loved my writing was a boy in my 10th grade English class. (So I dated him),” she says parenthetically on her website.

Her creative streak came from an early start in reading, a pastime she says she developed to escape perpetual teasing from her older siblings. Her favorite then? *Where the Wild Things Are*, a children’s picture book published in 1963.

She went on to attend the University of Florida, then earn a master’s degree in speech pathology at Penn State, where she also met her future husband. He surprised her one day with all of the stuffed *Wild Things* characters, thus “proving his worth,” she said.

In *The Homecoming*, a young man with anger issues has been kicked out of his house and bounces like a pinball from one relative’s house to another.

Ramey currently works with high school-aged autistic children, introducing them to the literary worlds she grew up loving. She lives in Wellington with her husband, children, and rescue dogs.

**GENERAL NONFICTION**

**Mark Woods**

Gold Medal, General Nonfiction—*Lassoing the Sun: A Year in America’s National Parks*

*Lassoing the Sun*, an adventure story about our country’s national parks, carries a particular resonance. The parks lately have been topics of national political discussion.
But Lassoing adds the poignant elements of a mother’s terminal illness. Mark Woods, his wife Toni, and his iPad-generation daughter Mia had planned a yearlong journey through 12 national parks. And his mother Nancy, stricken with cancer, went along.

Woods, metro columnist for the Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville, took the trip as a result of winning a professional award that offers journalists a chance to broaden their horizons. The book is his memoir of this adventure. His mother’s illness and death are intertwined and are part of the story’s mystique: that we leave part of ourselves—and can find suggestions of others—in the places we have visited.

“When she was told she was dying, she told me she wanted me to continue with my plans. And for the most part, I did. When she was still alive, I went to the places she loved to find solace. When she was gone, I took comfort knowing I could return to these places to find her,” Woods told CNN. He and his family live in Jacksonville.

J. Michael Butler
Silver Medal, General Nonfiction—Beyond Integration

*Beyond Integration* addresses how cultural racism persisted in Escambia County from 1960 to 1980. But author J. Michael Butler says that area’s specific story is really the story of an entire nation.

“The significance of my research indicates that contemporary issues such as police brutality and the display of Confederate imagery in public places became and, in many cases, remain the civil rights battlegrounds of the post-1960s era,” Butler told the *St. Augustine Record*.

A history professor at Flagler College in St. Augustine, Butler graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor’s degree in history from Spring Hill College, Mobile, Alabama, where he was honored as a President’s Scholar. He received both his master’s and doctorate in history from the University of Mississippi, where he specialized in 20th-century Southern History with an emphasis on the Civil Rights movement. Butler lives in St. Augustine.

Bob Shacochis
Bronze Medal, General Nonfiction—Kingdoms in the Air: Dispatches from the Far Away

Bob Shacochis’s life will inspire adventurous journalists and pique the fantasies of armchair swashbucklers. He has covered war in the Balkans, conflicts in Haiti, and spymasters in the arcane world of espionage. He has traveled on a tramp steamer, communed with criminals and bears on Russia’s Kamchatka peninsula, and hiked dizzying mountains in Nepal.

“What fun to be a ne’er-do-well in Kathmandu,” Shacochis writes.

*Kingdoms in the Air* is a book of essays about his adventures and exotic places. Among them: pursuing the South American dorado, a large predatory fish; camping rough in Mozambique; and dodging coral spikes while surfing on Christmas Island.

A Peace Corps volunteer in the 1970s, Shacochis’s travel—if so bland a word may be used—has informed his writing. He is a much-decorated scribe, having won a National Book Award and a prestigious Prix de Rome from the National Academy of Arts and Letters, among many other literary honors.

This Renaissance man also is a culinary artist and has been the cooking columnist for *GQ* (formerly *Gentlemen’s Quarterly*) magazine. He lives in Tallahassee, where he teaches creative writing at Florida State University.

Craig Pittman
Gold Medal, Florida Nonfiction—Oh, Florida! How America’s Weirdest State Influences the Rest of the Country

A *Tampa Bay Times* reporter since 1989, Craig Pittman writes about environmental issues: endangered manatees, smuggled orchids, and besieged wetlands, for example. Regularly, he turns those topics into books. *The Scent of Scandal*, the orchid saga published in 2012, earned Pittman a Florida Book Award silver medal.

A native Floridian, Pittman’s fourth book, *Oh, Florida!* defines our state in all its many textures: its strange-but-true stories, its contradictions, its places of primordial beauty, its fantasies, and its scary realities—pythons and gators and sinkholes and such. The implicit message: Florida must be America’s strangest (and most interesting) state.

Among other true tales, Pittman tells of evangelist Billy Graham’s sermons to alligators; of a man who assaulted another with a catfish; and of a DUI suspect dressed as a pig.
“When I heard I won a gold medal from the Florida Book Awards I was so startled I nearly dropped my machete!” Pittman said. “The success of this book, which was rejected by 15 publishers as ‘too regional’ before St. Martin’s Press gave it a chance, has been more than a little gratifying. In fact, it has led to me getting my own Wikipedia entry—to differentiate me from Craig ‘Pitbull’ Pittman, the pro wrestler.” Pittman the writer lives with his wife and family in St. Petersburg.

Gregory W. Bush
Silver Medal, Florida Nonfiction—White Sand, Black Beach: Civil Rights, Public Space and Miami’s Virginia Key

A longtime history professor at the University of Miami, Gregory Bush led his community in public parks advocacy. A recent project is Nature Links, which brings continuing education to developmentally delayed young adults—local history, job training, and volunteer opportunities in the natural world.

In the classroom, Bush, who recently retired, specialized in modern American history. “The book grew out of my early concerns about the lack of quality analysis about African-American history in Miami, combined with my growing consciousness about the erosion of public space,” Bush said.

White Sands, Black Beach recounts the story of an African-American recreation spot and tells how it fell into relative obscurity after Jim Crow laws ended. In 1945, Florida’s first postwar civil rights demonstration took place in Dade County at a whites-only spot called Virginia Beach. Under pressure, the Dade County Commission eventually designated Virginia Beach as a beach for African Americans. But after the desegregation of Florida beaches, many African Americans saw Virginia Beach as a symbol of the bad old days and stopped going there.

Bush is retiring in Maine, where he has purchased the “Hen House” in Blue Hill, once owned by Noel Paul Stookey of the renowned singing group Peter, Paul & Mary. “I didn’t buy it directly from him,” Bush said. He is converting the building for multiple uses: part of it will be his residence, a section will be used as a bed and breakfast inn, and another will be rented out as offices. Bush is also starting another Nature Links program in Blue Hill.

Marty Jourard
Bronze Medal, Florida Nonfiction—Music Everywhere: The Rock and Roll Roots of a Southern Town

Marty Jourard’s rock roots are deep. His first memory of a pop song is Elvis Presley’s “Return to Sender.” He bought his first single in 1963: “Walk Like a Man,” by the Four Seasons. He spent a mid-1960s year in England, soaking up the Beatles and the Stones.

Jourard grew up in music-crazy Gainesville, where his father was a University of Florida psychology professor. There he played in a high school band called Uncle Funnel and the Push and became part of a scene that made Gainesville a place that spawned some of America’s great rock ‘n’ roll musicians. Think Tom Petty, for starters, and there were dozens more. Jourard went on to join the 1980s band The Motels, which released five albums and two top-ten singles.

Music Everywhere tells the whole story. “This book is a history but also a love letter to Gainesville, as it was a place that encouraged and supported music, bringing plenty of wild rock and roll energy to what otherwise could have been just another small southern college town,” Jourard wrote in the preface. Jourard, who lives in Kirkland, Washington, still performs as well as teaches music.

Natasha Kuzmanovic
Gold Medal, Visual Arts—Tropical Light: The Art of A.E. Backus

Natasha Kuzmanovic brings glittering credentials to her work. The author and essayist holds an art history Ph.D. and a degree in museum studies. She has worked at various art museums, including the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and she has written about art and ornamentation, sculpture, and jewelry.

Her hope is that Tropical Light will cement A.E. “Beanie” Backus’s place as a major national painter. As former Florida governor and United States senator Bob Graham writes in the book’s foreword, “He was no mere regionalist.”
Backus is widely recognized today as a mentor for the Highwaymen, the now-famous group of Florida landscape artists. But he is less known for his own work. Kuzmanovic’s book showcases how Backus captured the spirit and soul of Florida and its idealized essence and preserves old Florida through depictions of rustic fish camps and scenes of small towns, ominous weather, shining beaches, and jungle-like rivers.

The Fort Pierce native “rendered the tropics better than any of his peers,” Kuzmanovic said at this year’s book awards banquet. Her self-published book contains more than 200 paintings by Backus and by a few other artists who inspired him and whom he inspired.

Kuzmanovic lives in New York, where she is a partner in the I. Joseph Chiarello Object Conservation Studio.

Melissa Farrell, Christina McDermott, and Emily Raffield
Silver Medal, Visual Arts—Saints of Old Florida

Saints of Old Florida reflects a way of life in the Florida Panhandle, especially in the more undiscovered areas of Port St. Joe, St. George Island, St. Teresa, St. Vincent’s, and St. Marks—the titular “saints” the book explores.

Melissa Farrell, Christina McDermott, and Emily Raffield all live in Port St. Joe. Only Raffield was born and raised in the region—on St. Joseph’s Bay, near Port St. Joe. Farrell is from Thomasville, Georgia, and McDermott was born in Monterrey, Mexico.

To read an extended article about the authors, how they met, and their unusual collaboration, see page 13.

Gary Monroe
Bronze Medal, Visual Arts—E.G. Barnhill: Florida Photographer, Adventurer, Entrepreneur

E.G. Barnhill became a fixture in St. Petersburg during the city’s booming, early 20th-century tourist era. A photographer, Barnhill splashed pigment into ordinary black-and-white photos. The results enchanted visitors with an in-color record of their trips and the exotic scenes they witnessed. A tinkerer who also built an early metal detector, Barnhill figured out how to turn his photos into postcards. Some of them suggest the paintings of the Florida Highwaymen, landscape artists who emerged in the 1950s, long after Barnhill’s heyday. E.G. Barnhill: Florida Photographer, Adventurer, Entrepreneur, which has less than 30 pages of text, contains more than 75 images of Barnhill’s colorized work.

Author Gary Monroe, a professor of fine arts and photography at Daytona State College, has produced several other Florida books, too. His diverse topics have included the Highwaymen, the Jewish community in South Beach, Miami’s Little Haiti neighborhood, self-taught artists, Disney World, and a trailer park for registered sex offenders.

Though he focuses on Florida, his travels have taken him to many countries, among them Brazil, Israel, Cuba, India, Trinidad, Poland, and Egypt. His camera is his constant companion. “I have always photographed incessantly,” Monroe told National Public Radio, “probably because it is my nature to do so.” He lives in DeLand.

Sharon Potts
Gold Medal, General Fiction—The Other Traitor

During her childhood, Sharon Potts’s mother lived in the same New York City neighborhood as Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the couple who were convicted of committing espionage for the Soviet Union and executed in 1953. Potts’s uncle knew one of the Rosenberg’s sons in school.
The memories always made her mother cry.

“Had they deserved to die? It was a question that haunted me,” Potts wrote on her website. Her book *The Other Traitor* explores this question through the eyes of a young French journalist determined to prove the innocence of her grandfather, who was executed, perhaps wrongfully, as a spy.

As a child, Potts wrote plays, many of them variants on the Hansel and Gretel theme. Sometimes she wrote stories, and her mother paid her 25 cents for each one.

Before she began writing novels as an adult, Potts was a certified public accountant and a corporate executive. She has served as treasurer of the national board of the Mystery Writers of America and president of that organization’s Florida chapter, which sponsors SleuthFest, an annual conference for mystery, suspense, and thriller writers.

She lives in Miami Beach with her husband and an Australian shepherd named Gidget.

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**S. Rose**

Silver Medal, General Fiction—*Sparrow in the Wind*

Sienna Rose has a soft spot in her heart for children who are different, and thereby vulnerable to bullying and abuse. Much of her work and her writing reflect those concerns.

She is a professional advocate, helping parents with disabled children navigate the difficulties they sometimes experience with school administrations. Rose earned a master’s degree in school counseling, writing her thesis on the needs of gay/lesbian/bi/trans youth in school.

*Sparrow in the Wind* tells the story of a troubled 10-year-old. Cassandra is devastated by her family’s move from a city to backwoods Wisconsin. A young Native American girl helps Cassandra rise from self-pity to a fascination with her new world. Then tragedy strikes.

Rose also has produced science fiction: a two-part saga titled *Song of the Manatee.* “Manatee(s) have profoundly beautiful spirits,” she told Goodreads, a book website. “When one comes close to interact with me…I see the wisdom of the universe in his eyes.”

A Boston native, Rose moved to Florida in 2002. She lives in High Springs with her husband.

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**Ira Sukrungruang**

Bronze Medal, General Fiction—*The Melting Season*

A Chicago-born Thai-American, Ira Sukrungruang won a Florida Book Award medal two years ago for a collection of autobiographical essays. It was in the general nonfiction category.

This time, Sukrungruang succeeded with fiction. Cultural isolation is the theme of *The Melting Season*’s collection of stories.

“As a child of immigrants, I went through a series of identity crises. Who am I? What defines me? So I started working through this in my writing. Still am,” Sukrungruang told *Fiction Writers Review.*

But there’s more. The book is spiced with descriptions of Thai food that publisher Burlesque Press says will make your mouth water. Sample this: “jasmine rice…hot chicken stir fry on top…cilantro, squirt of fish sauce, tablespoon of sugar…squeeze a lime for a drop or two of juice.” Hungry yet?

Sukrungruang has been working on several other projects: a memoir about being a monk for a month, a memoir about his love for dogs, and a collection of poetry.

He teaches in the master of fine arts program at the University of South Florida in Tampa.

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**Dorian Cirrone**

Gold Medal, Older Children’s Literature—*The First Last Day*

Dorian Cirrone spent time as a feature writer, editorial page editor, and assistant city editor for a daily newspaper. Despite the lure, lore, and romance of journalism, it couldn’t dissolve Cirrone’s passion for fiction.

She returned to college, got a master’s degree in English, and taught college freshman comp as a Ph.D. candidate. Then she realized she didn’t want to be a professor, either. She saw it was time to plunge into serious writing.

In *The First Last Day,* Haleigh Adams—as any 11-year-old would—relishes memories of her summer’s last day. But as most 11-year-olds would not, Haleigh wakes up one mysterious morning stunned to learn she is reliving that last day. Not such a good thing, as *The First Last Day* requires her to rewind time to save the future.
Cirrone has produced several novels for older children, picture books, early “chapter books” for intermediate readers, poetry collections, and short story anthologies.

“Picture books are definitely the most challenging,” Cirrone told LiveJournal, a blogging site. “They look easy, but it’s difficult to come up with something that excites publishers, parents, and children. The writing also has to be both compressed and lyrical—like poetry.”

She lives with her husband and two children in Davie.

Christina Diaz Gonzalez
Silver Medal, Older Children’s Literature—Return Fire

Multiple-medal winner Christina Diaz Gonzalez is another among many writers who have rediscovered their love of writing and found great success. A Florida Book Award gold medalist in the 2010 awards, Gonzalez practiced law for many years, but found that creating fiction was better than writing legal memoranda.

In Return Fire, Gonzalez’s fourth book brings back heroine Cassie Arroyo. The young adventurer continues to pursue her ancient bloodline, which lets her wield the fabled Spear of Destiny. It is said to be the lance that pierced the crucified Jesus. In popular culture, whoever carries it is blessed (or cursed) with supernatural ability. Cassie must be careful.

Moving Target, the first part of Cassie’s saga, earned Gonzalez a bronze book award medal last year. All of her books portray children engaged in high adventure.

“All kids deserve to see themselves and each other as heroes and heroines,” she told the magazine Latina.

Gonzalez has won a number of other awards, too, including the American Library Association’s Best Fiction for Young Adults, the Nebraska Book Award, the International Reading Association’s Teacher’s Choice Award, and the ALA Quick Pick for Young Adult Readers.

She lives in Coral Gables with her family.

James Ponti
Bronze Medal, Older Children’s Literature—Framed! A T.O.A.S.T. Mystery

Okay, so you are 12 years old and doing your homework. The director of the FBI texts you. The game’s afoot! But do you save your grade or rescue your country?

That’s the dilemma for Florian Bates in Framed! This pre-teen is a consulting detective for the FBI because of his T.O.A.S.T., which stands for the Theory Of All Small Things. The genius kid and his new friend Margaret use the theory to take on a crime syndicate called EEL.

Author James Ponti was born in Pisa, Italy, and raised in Atlantic Beach. He attended the University of Southern California, where he majored in screenwriting. He worked as a writer and producer in television for more than 20 years, and has produced shows for the History Channel, Spike TV, the Golf Channel, and Roller Derby.

“I figured screenwriting was a mix of things that I liked and was good at. In truth, it was a great fit. It also shaped the way I now write books. I think of them like little movies in my head,” Ponti says on his website.

He and his wife Denise, whom he met on a blind date in college, live in Maitland.

One of their sons, Alex, passed away in 2015. He was autistic and epileptic. “We miss him every day and cherish all of our memories with him,” Ponti said. Their other son, Grayson, is in college in Ohio.

Richard Wickliffe
Gold Medal, Popular Fiction—Storm Crashers

Besides writing fiction based on Florida’s often peculiar ambience, Richard Wickliffe has published nonfiction about investigative topics in business journals. And his art and photography have been exhibited in Fort Lauderdale’s Art Guild and published in Forbes Travel magazine.

Wickliffe also speaks about creative crimes. He spoke twice at the FBI’s InfraGard Counterterrorism conference, and has participated on panels dedicated to accuracy in crime writing.

“I enjoy keeping things within a realm of possibility,” Wickliffe told Southern Writers magazine.

Storm Crashers, originally published as a result of an Amazon crime-writing competition, is his third novel. A devastating hurricane is on the way and mysterious, high-tech thieves are using evacuations as cover for their looting sprees. The story is inspired by real crimes.

“We live in a colorful, crazy, insane state,” Wickliffe said at the Florida Book Award banquet.

He and his family live in Coral Springs. Wickliffe says on his website that he and his family “are regular visitors to any coast with sufficient hammocks and blenders.”
Ward Larsen  
Silver Medal, Popular Fiction— 
*Passenger 19*  
Ward Larsen is a consistent Florida Book Award winner, having also been honored for three of his previous books. A former U.S. Air Force fighter pilot, Larsen flew 22 missions in Operation Desert Storm. “I am an airline pilot who writes about airplanes crashing,” he said facetiously at this year’s book award dinner, referring to the thrillers he writes. Larsen also has served as a federal law enforcement officer and as an aircraft accident investigator. After earning a bachelor’s degree at the University of Central Florida, he took a few flying lessons on a whim, then joined the Air Force for pilot training. Eventually he became a commercial pilot, and that led to writing. “I began writing as a new airline pilot. I had many long layovers and was looking for something productive to do,” he says on his website.  
In *Passenger 19*, detective Jammer Davis investigates an airplane crash in a Colombian jungle. He learns that the crash seemed impossible to survive—and his daughter was listed on the passenger manifesto. Could she possibly have survived? Was she part of a hijacking? A sinister plot? Read his book to find the answers! Larsen lives in Sarasota with his wife Rose, whom he met when both were in the third grade. They have three children.  

Tom Lowe  
Bronze Medal, Popular Fiction— 
*A Murder of Crows*  
Tom Lowe’s serial protagonist, Sean O’Brien, has been compared to Travis McGee, star of the widely popular series by the late John D. MacDonald. Like McGee, O’Brien is a self-assured hero who will knock on any door to solve a crime.  
*A Murder of Crows* is Lowe’s eighth book featuring O’Brien. O’Brien’s friend Joe Billie stops a grave robber from desecrating a Seminole burial site, but Billie, a Seminole himself, is arrested as the No. 1 suspect in a murder case that seems related. O’Brien brings a powerful sense of Florida place and a knowledge of Seminole lore into this story—so that Florida becomes a virtual character.  

Jay Hopler  
Gold Medal, Poetry—*The Abridged History of Rainfall*  
Here’s how Jay Hopler was described in an interview with McSweeny’s, a nonprofit publisher: “a dedicated practitioner of Ashtanga yoga with a Ph.D. in contractual murder. He has many loves, and they are all bone-deep and handsome: backcountry fishing, rock climbing, creature features, punk music, Flemish art, Arsenal Football Club, and the ghost stories of M.R. James.” The diverse (and sometimes whimsical) characterization suggests Hopler’s approach to *The Abridged History of Rainfall*. He said in the McSweeny’s interview that he didn’t want the collection to sound the same as his previous one. Instead, he aimed for “a new way of proceeding, a new music, a new voice, a new way of perceiving and being in the world.” He calls the formula approach “self-echo…one step away from self-imitation, and self-imitation too easily and too often becomes self-parody.” *Abridged History* is an elegy to Hopler’s father. A finalist in the National Book Awards poetry category, the book contains an intense collection of poems that address grief and the struggle to live with it. Hopler lives in Tampa, where he teaches creative writing at the University of South Florida. He is married to poet and Renaissance scholar Kimberly Johnson.
Tana Jean Welch  
**Silver Medal, Poetry—**  
*Latest Volcano*  

Tana Jean Welch says she has always been a writer because, in the words of author Alice Walker, “writing saves her from the sin and inconvenience of violence.”  

*Latest Volcano* suggests the trials of the human soul in the fierce arenas of love, sex, grief, and war. For example:  

> I spent my life teaching her about men and poison, making sure she knew a woman must behave as a turtle: learn what to hide, what to show…  

*Said the Tampa Review:*  

> “Perhaps the best part of Welch’s collection is the continuous presence of two emotions—happiness and sorrow—that occur simultaneously within each poem.”  

Welch earned a master of fine arts degree in poetry from San Diego State University and a Ph.D. in literature from Florida State University. Her work has appeared in numerous newspapers and literary journals, including the *New York Times*, *The Southern Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *The Colorado Review*.  

Born and raised in Fresno, California, she lives in Tallahassee, where she is assistant professor of medical humanities at FSU.  

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Marci Calabretta Cancio-Bello  
**Bronze Medal, Poetry—**  
*Hour of the Ox*  

As a child, Marci Calabretta Cancio-Bello read everything she could find. “Books, brochures, posters, even the fine print on the shampoo bottles and the bottom of the Kleenex box. I used to bring home boxfuls of old, obscure novels and volumes of poetry full of mold from library and garage sales. I was obsessed with the British Romantic poets,” she told the *Columbia Journal*, that university’s online literary publication.  

Nonetheless, she first tried writing fiction. The results were terrible, she said, and so she focused instead on creating poetry.  

> At first, she wrote sentimental verse for family members.  

> “They were awful, clumsy creations that adhered to specific syllable counts and easy end-rhymes, but people seemed to like them,” she said.  

> The early efforts were first steps toward success. She has won two Academy of American Poets Prizes and the Donald Hall Prize for Poetry, among other significant awards.  

> In *Hour of the Ox*, Cancio-Bello employs such diverse symbols as a grandmother’s diving knife, the sea, bonsai, skin, a clam, even a hummingbird sheltering in the plumage of a goose. All are part of a mythic journey into the author’s family history.  

She lives in Coral Gables.  

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Isabel Garcia Cintas  
**Gold Medal, Spanish Language—**  
*La Casa Vieja y Otros Relatos*  

The widely traveled Cintas was born in Argentina and studied photography and journalism in Buenos Aires. She lived for three years in Melbourne, Australia, and returned to San Carlos de Bariloche in Argentina, working there in radio and print media.  

> “I always wanted to be a writer, ever since I read, as a pre-teen, Louisa May Alcott, Mark Twain, and all those wonderful classic storytellers,” Cintas said.  

> “But Mom, thinking that I was too independent, told me that writers rarely earn a living. So I went for journalism, which was the closest to a self-sustaining life of writing. It was a long road until I really sat to write fiction as I wished in my youth, but the reward is as fulfilling and satisfying as I dreamed,” she said.  

*La Casa Vieja* (*The Old House*) is a collection of stories that probe the human heart through female protagonists. For example, in one story a woman prepares to meet her past, and what could have been and was not. In another, a character pays dearly to be the “other woman” in a stormy triangle.  

Cintas has lived with her family in the United States since 1987 and in Florida since 2001. They currently live in Sunny Isles Beach, which is on a barrier island in Dade County.
Ethan Long
Gold Medal, Young Children’s Literature—Big Cat and Gwen P. Reichert Gold Medal Winner

Ethan Long has written and illustrated more than 80 children’s books, one of which resulted in an Emmy-nominated television series. Some of his other work has been published by such top companies as Disney, Nickelodeon, Barnes and Noble, Penguin, and Simon & Schuster.

So how much does he like writing? “I will write until my hand falls off, and even then, I will write with my feet, and then with my mouth, and then with my eyes. I love it,” he told the Chicago Daily Herald. At this year’s Florida book award banquet, he said: “I write to entertain myself.”

Long also won the Gwen P. Reichert Gold Medal. It is a tribute to honor Reichert, a rare book collector and nurturer of authors and their audiences, who was committed to children’s education.

Long’s winning book is about an impossibly adorable feline who puts up with way more than kitties normally do. His final humiliation is being dressed in a wig, Kentucky Derby-style hat, and high heels. But despite it all, it is quite clear that Big Cat loves his family.

Long lives in Orlando with his wife Heather, their three children, and his dog Auggie.

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