7-1-2012

Forum : Vol. 36, No. 02 (Summer : 2012)

Florida Humanities Council.

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Virginia Lynn Moylan
Martin A. Dyckman
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Recommended Citation
Florida Humanities Council; McKeen, William; Moylan, Virginia Lynn; Dyckman, Martin A.; Larsen, Ward; Hagberg, David; Graham, Bob; Van Cleve, Ryan G.; Martinez, Jessica; Flinn, Alex; Cardillo, Margaret; Berkes, Marianne; DiTerlizzi, Angela; Barrett, Lynne; Stuckey-French, Elizabeth; Umbarger, Caren; Milanich, Jerald T.; Root, Nina J.; Kampa, Stephan; Kirby, David; Russo, Gianna; Ryals, Mary Jane; and Milasinovic, Irena, "Forum : Vol. 36, No. 02 (Summer : 2012)" (2012). Forum : the Magazine of the Florida Humanities Council. 63.
https://digital.usfsp.edu/forum_magazine/63

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Patrick Smith’s Discovery of an Unforgettable

FROM CROATIA, WITH MEMORIES

WILD THINGS ARE POSSIBLE AT ALLIGATOR POINT
IT TOOK A VILLAGE to create the Florida Book Awards. But those of us who were part of that effort know that the vision, the inspiration, and the leadership came from one person, Wayne Wiegand.

Wayne, a Wisconsin native, joined the Florida State University faculty in 2002 as professor of library and information studies and American studies. He attributes his inspiration for the Florida Book Awards to historian Gary Mormino’s book Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams. Realizing that Floridians lacked a sense of statewide identity, he concluded that a statewide program honoring Florida books could help forge a sense of place while building the profile of the high-quality literature Florida authors were producing.

Armed with the skills of his trade, Wayne went about doing what he does best—collecting history and information. He traveled to several states to interview officials of other book awards programs to find out what worked best. He fondly remembers surveying the bookshelf of California Book Award winners and finding a copy of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Grapes of Wrath inscribed by John Steinbeck.

In 2006, Wayne, in partnership with FSU professor John Fenstermaker, assembled a group of representatives from Florida libraries and literary organizations to organize the Florida Book Awards. In the spring of 2007 Gov. Charlie Crist honored the first winners at a luncheon in the garden of the Governor’s Mansion. During the past five years, the Florida Book Awards has grown in size and profile with increased applications and new categories. One of the Florida Humanities Council’s contributions has been to feature the winners in our annual summer books issue.

This year Wayne retires. But like the good librarian/historian he is, he leaves us with a documented history of success and with shelves of award-winning books. We hope that someday soon there will be a Pulitzer Prize winner among them.

Janine Farver
# table of contents

2  How Florida Fuels Its Writers

4  Patrick Smith’s Discovery of an Unforgettable Florida  *excerpt*

8  **FLORIDA NONFICTION**
   - **GOLD**  William McKeen, *Mile Marker Zero*  *excerpt*
   - **SILVER**  Virginia Lynn Moylan, *Zora Neale Hurston’s Final Decade*  *excerpt*
   - **BRONZE**  Martin A. Dyckman, *Reubin O’D. Askew and the Golden Age of Florida Politics*  *excerpt*

12  **POPULAR FICTION**
   - **GOLD**  Ward Larsen, *Fly by Night*
   - **SILVER**  David Hagberg, *ABYSS*  *excerpt*
   - **BRONZE**  Bob Graham, *Keys to the Kingdom*  *excerpt*

16  **YOUNG ADULT**
   - **GOLD**  Ryan G. Van Cleve, *Unlocked*
   - **SILVER**  Jessica Martinez, *Virtuosity*
   - **BRONZE**  Alex Flinn, *Cloaked*

17  **CHILDREN’S LITERATURE**
   - **GOLD**  Margaret Cardillo, *Just Being Audrey*
   - **SILVER**  Marianne Berkes, *Over in Australia*
   - **BRONZE**  Angela DiTerlizzi, *Say What?*

18  Humanities Alive!
News and events of the Florida Humanities Council

20  **GENERAL FICTION**
   - **GOLD**  Lynne Barrett, *Magpies*  *excerpt*
   - **SILVER**  Elizabeth Stuckey-French, *The Revenge of the Radioactive Lady*  *excerpt*
   - **BRONZE**  Caren Umbarger, *Coming To: A Midwestern Tale*

25  **VISUAL ARTS**
   - **GOLD**  Jerald T. Milanch and Nina J. Root, *Hidden Seminoles*  *excerpt*

26  **POETRY**
   - **GOLD**  Stephan Kampa, *Cracks in the Invisible*
   - **SILVER**  David Kirby, *Talking about Movies with Jesus*
   - **BRONZE**  Gianna Russo, *MoonFlower*

28  My Favorite Florida Place
Wild things are possible at Alligator Point
*By Mary Jane Ryals*

32  Bridging Cultures
From Croatia, with memories
*By Irena Milasinovic*
How Florida fuels its writers

By Barbara O’Reilley

Florida is a “stew of paradoxes,” a “rolling wave of human experiences,” a place of cultural extremes “teeming with stories begging to be written,” some writers say. They see this never-boring, always-changing cultural cacophony as a great source of ideas. Others, though, seek out Florida’s lush natural world for inspiration—strolling under live oaks draped by Spanish moss, drifting along whispering rivers, taking in the balmy breezes on the beach at night. “From the beauty and warmth that surround me here, my swirling dreams can become stories and I am set free to write,” says author Caren Umbarger.

It shouldn’t be surprising that a state defined by its eclecticism can accommodate such different styles. We asked this year’s Florida Book Award winners how this place fuels their creativity, and their responses reflect a broad spectrum. Meet them and read more of their insights in the coming pages of our annual summer book-award issue. You’ll also see excerpts of some of their winning books (those with Florida topics).

And don’t miss the “Bridging Cultures” column, written by Irena Milasinovic. Her compelling account of moving here from war-torn Croatia evokes the feeling of displacement—of being “neither here nor there”—that is so much a part of life for the many migrants, immigrants, and refugees in a state where two out of three residents come from someplace else.

That brings us back to the quality that some writers love about this place. Here’s how author Lynne Barrett, one of this year’s award winners, summed it up:

“A phrase from an old sign is pinned to my bulletin board: Florida Attractions. For me, it evokes all that Florida attracts, from lightning to con men. Attraction is an essential force in fiction; it draws characters to what will test and change them. In Florida they may seek refuge, fantasy, warmth in winter, one last score, recognition, anonymity, the dangerous, or the endangered. The one sure thing they’ll find is the unexpected, some twist from safety to risk and, maybe, back again. My imagination finds these stories irresistible.”

BARBARA O’REILLEY is editor of FORUM.

To read authors’ comments in full, go to FloridaHumanities.org

A Land Remembered, which tells the story of three generations of a fictional pioneer Florida family, brings 100 years of history to life. It “should be handed out with the orange juice at welcome stations to anyone who crosses the state line,” one of the award judges said.

Also in this issue, enjoy the memoir of Alligator Point, written by Florida native Mary Jane Ryals. Her lively descriptions in “My Favorite Florida Place” bring home just how much our natural world nurtures the spirit.

And don’t miss the “Bridging Cultures” column, written by Irena Milasinovic. Her compelling account of moving here from war-torn Croatia evokes the feeling of displacement—of being “neither here nor there”—that is so much a part of life for the many migrants, immigrants, and refugees in a state where two out of three residents come from someplace else.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award Winner</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Just Being Audrey</em></td>
<td>Margaret Cardillo, Illustrated by Julia Denos</td>
<td>HarperCollins Children's Books</td>
<td><a href="http://www.harpercollinschildrens.com">www.harpercollinschildrens.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing</em></td>
<td>Patrick Smith</td>
<td><a href="http://www.PatrickSmithOnline.com">www.PatrickSmithOnline.com</a></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>A Land Remembered</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Silver</strong></td>
<td><em>Over in Australia: Amazing Animals Down Under</em></td>
<td>Marianne Berkes</td>
<td>Dawn Publications</td>
<td><a href="http://www.dawnpub.com">www.dawnpub.com</a></td>
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<td>Virginia Lynn Moylan</td>
<td>University Press of Florida</td>
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<td><strong>Bronze</strong></td>
<td><em>Abyss</em></td>
<td>David Hagberg</td>
<td>TorForge Books</td>
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<td>Epic Reads</td>
<td><a href="http://www.epicreads.com">www.epicreads.com</a></td>
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<td>Caren Umbarger</td>
<td>CreateSpace Independent Publishing</td>
<td><a href="http://www.umbart.com">www.umbart.com</a></td>
</tr>
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</table>
This horrible culling of their herd was just one of many setbacks faced by the tenacious McIvey family, the fictional Cracker pioneers who carved out hardscrabble lives on the Florida frontier, starting in the mid-1800s. They fought off bears, saw Rebel deserters torch the home they built, faced down murderous rustlers, dodged hurricanes and venomous snakes, and did whatever else it took to survive a wilderness like no other.

Their story is chronicled in Patrick Smith’s beloved novel, *A Land Remembered*, which over the past three decades has introduced many Floridians to the real pre-Disney history of their state. Published in 1984, it is the best known of the seven novels and numerous short stories and nonfiction books that Smith has penned over a half-century. In recognition of the lasting impact his work has had on Florida, Smith, now 84, has been named recipient of the 2012 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing.

Smith himself is still amazed at the public’s response to *A Land Remembered*. “It beats anything I ever saw,” he said in his thick southern drawl during a recent interview. Smith and his wife Iris still live in their modest Merritt Island home of 45 years.

Readers have sent him thousands of letters over the years, some exclaiming that the book tells the story of their own families. Parents have named their children after the story’s characters. Folks on their deathbeds have requested the book be read to them. Many Florida schools require students to read it. Some gated communities hand it out to newcomers as an introduction to the state.

How did Smith, who’s originally from Mississippi, write a Florida story that has struck such a chord with Floridians? That’s a story in itself.

When he first set eyes on Florida, Smith was an 8-year-old boy gazing out the backseat window of an old Ford.
was 1935, and his folks had saved up $100 (a lot of money during the Depression) for a three-week family vacation. They left their small town in southern Mississippi and drove the full length and breadth of Florida—down the Gulf Coast, over the Tamiami Trail, up the Atlantic Coast, and then back home.

They saw miles and miles of uninhabited beaches with sand as white as powdered sugar; tiny fishing villages; gumbo limbo trees, strangler figs, and wild orchids; panthers, alligators, and flocks of birds so thick they actually blocked out the sun; and prairies, swamps, and endless waves of sawgrass stretching to the horizon. "It was like leaving this earth and going to another planet," Smith has said in reminiscing about the experience.

After that, he became fascinated with this "really really different, beautiful" place, reading books about it after returning to Mississippi. His connection to Florida only grew over time. In 1948 he married Iris, who came from a pioneer Florida family in DeLand—and they brought their kids to the state every summer for long visits.

When Smith earned a master's degree in literature at the University of Mississippi, he wrote his thesis about Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, author of such Florida classics as *The Yearling* and *Cross Creek*, which describe the lives of backwoods people in central Florida. "Her books were so down-to-earth and realistic about people you could understand," he said.

Finally, in 1966, Smith landed a job as public relations director at Brevard Community College in Cocoa, and he and his family moved permanently to Florida. He had always been what he calls a "moonlight writer," working on novels during evenings and weekends while keeping his day job. He'd written two books that way in Mississippi. After he officially became a Floridian, he set out to write a Florida book.

At the time, Florida's post-World War II population boom was in full swing. A thousand new residents were moving into the state *per day*. Developers were building more and more highways, housing tracts, and strip malls. Pavement and people were replacing the wild, other-worldly landscape that Smith remembered.

The dramatic contrast between the Florida he fell in love with as a child and the rapidly developing Florida he moved to as an adult would become a driving force in his writing. The stories he went on to research and write focused on the exotic land and hardy people of old Florida, and dramatized the tension between preserving the natural environment and bulldozing it.

He wanted his first Florida novel to be a story about an old Seminole Indian being pushed off his ancestral land in the swamp to make way for a housing development. Before he could write it, however, he had to overcome a problem: "I knew absolutely nothing about the Seminole culture," he said.

The solution, he decided, was to drive down to Big Cypress Reservation, introduce himself to some Seminoles, and ask them about their lives. It would be six months before he worked up the nerve to actually do this, he said. Then, for several frustrating months he drove every weekend to the reservation and tried to meet people and start conversations. The Indians were always polite, "but nobody would talk to me," he said. Finally, he decided to give up—joking ruefully to himself that maybe he should write a "who-done-it" or even a romance novel.

But first he figured he'd give it one more try—this time driving to the Hollywood Reservation and paying admission to a small wildlife park run by Seminoles to bring in tourist dollars. It was a hot summer day, so Smith stopped at a concession stand to buy a cold drink. As he stood in line he noticed "a very fierce-looking young Seminole man" standing next to him.

Smith describes the encounter this way: "I looked at him and he looked at me, and one of those magical things happened that might happen to a person only once in a lifetime. Without saying a single word, we formed a bond of friendship."

Smith introduced himself and said that he wanted to write a book about Seminoles but that no one would talk to him. "What do you want to know?" the young man asked.

Angel City, Smith's second Florida novel, depicts the struggle of migrant workers. He stands at the gate to the labor camp, used in 1980 as the set for a CBS Movie of the Week based on the book. This led to legislation giving workers more rights and better living conditions.
“Everything,” Smith responded. “I want to know about your religion, your superstitions, your fears, your legends, how you actually live on a day-by-day basis. But more than anything I want to know the Indian outlook on what is happening to nature today.”

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know,” the young Indian responded. The two men then sat under a nearby cabbage palm tree and began talking. Their meetings continued on a regular basis over a two-month period. The young man also took Smith on an airboat ride, giving him a first-hand look at Big Cypress and the Everglades, and introduced him to Betty Mae Jumper, then the Seminole chief and a lifelong tribal storyteller.

Smith said the knowledge he gained from these tutorials not only enabled him to write his first Florida novel, *Forever Island*, but also spilled over to his other Florida books, especially *A Land Remembered* and *Allapattah*, a story about a Seminole man in despair about the encroachment of development on the Everglades and the loss of a way of life.

Smith’s Seminole tutor was none other than James Billie, who went on to become the chief who brought big-time gaming and prosperity to the Tribe. At the time Smith met him, in the late 1960s, Billie had just returned from serving two tours in the Vietnam War, most of it as an Army Ranger. The two men kept in touch for many years afterwards, especially through events that Smith organized at Brevard Community College to feature Seminole culture.

In 1982, Smith decided to write about the Cracker pioneers who settled the wild Florida frontier. He was intrigued by the tales his wife’s family recounted about their ancestors, and he’d heard other stories while doing his Seminole research. The books by Rawlings inspired him, too. But instead of writing about one year in the life of backwoods people, as she did in *The Yearling*, Smith set out to cover 100 years of Florida history, told through the lives of three generations of a Cracker family.

He read numerous histories about Florida, but none told the human story that he wanted to tell about why people came and how they survived. So, Smith became a modern-day anthropologist, seeking out and interviewing scores of old-Florida families about the lives of their ancestors. Some still lived in Cracker cabins in the woods. He sat with them on their front porches, drank their strong coffee, and listened to their stories, often staying for a meal.

The resulting book, *A Land Remembered*, is a saga that traces the evolution of Florida from its frontier days to modern times through a family that is a composite of the many Smith met during his field research. The McIveys started penniless, subsisted off the land, and began capturing and branding wild cattle that had proliferated in the scrub over the 200 years since Spanish colonists brought them to Florida. Succeeding generations built up herds that they drove across a state with no fences, raised citrus, accumulated land and, in the 20th century, began selling land for development. The last of the McIveys regretted this and mourned for the old Florida days.

Smith said he “never dreamed” that this novel would become so popular and expressed “a few theories” as to why:

“People new to Florida are fascinated by what it used to be. They had no idea this state was like that portrayed in the novel. For some people, it is the way [pioneers] used to live, the family values and things like that. There’s so much action that young kids like it.” Then he added, “I don’t know. It just kind of pushed a button.”

BARBARA O’REILLEY, editor of FORUM, wrote this article using information from many sources, including a recent interview with Smith, a Q&A in the Winter 2006 FORUM, and the documentary “Patrick Smith’s Sense of Place.”
The marsh dissipated rapidly, and then they came to the edge of the place they were seeking, the great cypress swamp. At first the land was peppered with small dwarf cypress and pond cypress; then suddenly there loomed before them the mighty virgin bald cypress trees themselves, reaching up to a hundred and fifty feet into the air, some with bases seventy feet in circumference.

Cypress knees sprang up all around the base of the trees, like giant mushrooms, some shaped like deformed human heads, some like birds, others like small animals, creating a wooden menagerie. Wild orchids clung to every limb, turning the somber trees into colorbursts of yellow and white and green and purple. There were also gumbo-limbo trees, lancewoods, cocoplum bushes; oaks festooned with Spanish moss; and the awesome magnolias with leaf-covered limbs reaching sixty feet outward and then downward to the ground, like a mother hen protecting her brood with a covering of wing feathers. Piercing all of it were royal palms whose bare trunks towered above some of the bald cypress, forming little umbrellas of fronds high in the sky.

At first they stopped and stared incredulously, comparing the giant bald cypress to the little matchsticks that formed cypress stands on the prairie; then they moved forward again.

The ground was dry, but they could see watermarks several inches up the cypress knees where water normally reached. They passed easily over dry sloughs that once would have to be forded, and skirted around ponds covered solidly with lily pads and green slime. Cottonmouth moccasins scurried away beneath the surface and left trail marks, and the snouts of alligators poked upward like dead logs, their eyes open and blank as the intruders passed by.

They were also greeted by hordes of mosquitoes, not a solid mass like the cloud at the salt marsh, but a constant annoyance. Zech and Tobias both slapped and scratched, wondering how the Indians who lived here could stand it.

They could see areas on the bases of the trees where panthers scratched the bark to shreds sharpening their claws, and the horses stepped around holes rooted out by wild hogs searching for food. The deeper they penetrated the swamp, the thicker became the trees and other foliage, until finally they faced obstacles almost as formidable as the custard-apple forest.

Once again they zigzagged and backtracked, searching for open paths, having difficulty controlling the cows. Zech was doubly worried, wondering if there was no end to this alien land, and also noticing Tobias slumping forward in the saddle, sweat pouring from his face and staining his shirt. He did not believe there was even a bare possibility of finding the Indian village in such an overwhelming swamp, that to continue was foolish and useless; but Tobias would not relent and turn back.

From A Land Remembered, © 1984, 2011 by Patrick D. Smith

To see an annotated list of all of Smith’s books, go to FloridaHumanities.org
CORCORAN LEARNED A LOT during his stint as Taco Tom, soaking up the salt-of-the-earth stuff he felt that writers needed in order to remove the academic stench from their writing and restore a connection to everyday experience. Pushing tacos also helped him make some good connections—first Tennessee Williams and now this odd couple, Harrison and McGuane.

“What I really wanted to do, of course, was write,” Corcoran said. “I thought all I needed was a hammock and a rum drink and a portable typewriter. I actually did write an alleged novel, which wound up very bad and I threw it away.”

McGuane, meanwhile, was fresh off selling his first two books to Hollywood. The show-biz hipsters now saw him as the next big thing, the long-haired, drug-generation Hemingway for the hippie demographic. The summer before, a couple of stoners with a handheld camera had filmed a glorified biker movie that redrew the rules in Hollywood. Now everyone was looking for the next Easy Rider. So McGuane came to mind: He has long hair, right? Shit, he looks like he just walked off the Easy Rider set. And he writes books? Damn, he’s our boy. Sign him up to write screenplays.

And so, like the mortal drudge he was when it came to work, Tom McGuane began researching and writing for the movies. Before long, he had his new friend, Tom Corcoran, watching his every move, learning to write screenplays at the elbow of Quick-Study Boy.

…In the meantime, Corcoran went to work tending bar at the Old Anchor Inn, one of the legendarily sleazy bars in a town with no shortage of such things.

“People slept in their cars behind the bar,” Corcoran recalled. “The restrooms often flooded; you walked on bricks to keep your shoes dry. Men in clothes swiped from clotheslines gambled tens and twenties at the pool table. The picket fence lining the sidewalk was erected to appease the city; there had been too many complaints of saloon patrons falling out the front door.”

The health department was not vigilant then. “Dogs would sleep on the bar,” recalled Dink Bruce, one of the town’s local celebrities.

In those days before Key West was a part-time playground for the very rich, the Old Anchor Inn was the great equalizer for the town’s residents, both “the natty and the ratty.” It was the sort of place where an out-of-work actor might recite the soliloquy
William McKeen

Gold Medal, Florida Nonfiction

The Key West of the 1970s has been compared to Ernest Hemingway’s Paris of the Twenties. The “southernmost city” lured a batch of late 20th-century writers, musicians, and other creative people whom William McKeen embraces in Mile Marker Zero, a book called “gonzo journalism at its best” by Gloria Colvin, chairwoman of the Florida Book Awards board.

The description should be no surprise. McKeen, former head of the University of Florida’s College of Journalism, previously wrote a biography of gonzo king Hunter Thompson. Also among the 12 books he has written or edited are a semi-scholarly study of the Beatles, a critical biography of Tom Wolfe, and a history of rock and roll.

McKeen said he hopes Mile Marker Zero proves popular. “I have seven children, and we’d like to get them back to three meals a day,” he said. Now director of Boston University’s journalism department, McKeen lives in Cohasset, Mass., with wife Nicole and their children.

“Key West has a laissez faire attitude that removes any boundaries and opens up possibilities unimagined.”

—William McKeen
SARA DESCRIBED 60-YEAR-OLD HURSTON as “proud, self-confident, optimistic, hardworking, and playful.” She recalled, “Zora had lived through some very difficult circumstances in her life, yet you would have never known it by her demeanor.” Her casual conversation, which was punctuated by southern idiom, was often laced with laughter and spiced with wit. She had been critically neglected, artistically stifled, and professionally limited by her gender and race, and the years and circumstances had left their marks. But for all she had suffered, Hurston adamantly and consistently refused to be defined or measured by the yardstick of others.

Proud and determined, she wrote various articles and a book review to support herself. In January 1951, she began an article for the American Legion magazine and wrote a review of Philippe Thoby Marcelin’s novel Pencil of God for the New York Tribune. The Legion, which had reprinted a copy of her previously published essay on the political exploitation of black voters, “I Saw Votes Peddled,” had offered her $600 to write an article on the Communist Party’s exploitation of the Negro. Over the years, she had made no secret of her abhorrence of communism, a hatred that had taken hold in the late 1920s when friend and poet Langston Hughes had taken an interest in it. In her article “Why Negroes Won’t Buy Communism,” published in the magazine’s June 1951 issue, Hurston argued that African Americans were neither impressed nor persuaded by the Communist Party’s “patronizing” recruitment efforts. Her assertion was that they resented the party’s characterization of them as “pitiable” and rejected its way of life, which was “as morbid and ugly as the devil’s doll-baby.”

...In addition to her article opposing communism, Zora also made a pitch to her agent Jean Parker Waterbury about an article on the lives of sugar-cane cutters who had been recruited from the West Indies...Hurston had witnessed southern peonage firsthand in the turpentine camps, sawmills, lumber companies, and citrus groves of Florida and was thoroughly familiar with the dangers cane cutters faced and the conditions imposed on them by their oppressive employers. Cane cutting was exceptionally dangerous and backbreaking work that began before sunrise and ended after sunset. The machetes that were used were razor sharp, and in spite of the steel-toed boots and aluminum guards cutters were required to wear on their hands, knees, and shins, one in three sustained serious injuries. It was also common to be bitten by fire ants or pierced in the eye or eardrum by a sharp cane leaf.

From Zora Neale Hurston’s Final Decade, © 2011 by Virginia Lynn Moylan
ALL REUNIONS ARE NOSTALGIC; this one was especially so. The 40 sport-shirted men seated with their wives beside the swimming pool at an Orlando hotel on a balmy October evening in 2002 shared a unique experience. The last time the man at the lectern had addressed them was from the podium of the Florida House of Representatives 28 years before. T. Terrell Sessums still appeared the same—as tall, professorial, and taciturn as when a reporter wrote of him that if the world ended he would be found standing calmly in the rubble, assessing his next move. The colleagues to whom he was speaking were also their recognizable old selves, despite some expanded waistlines and hair that was graying or gone. But for them the world had ended, at least the part that had been their special bond. Florida politics had changed almost beyond recognition since their time in Tallahassee. Sessums remarked on the difference. “I have a little difficulty remembering which of you were Republicans and Democrats. They don’t have that problem any longer,” he said.

Their common bond was having served in the House from 1971 through 1974, the flowering of what came to be remembered as the Golden Age of the Florida Legislature. The decade of the 1970s was distinguished by progressive politics and a constructive two-party system. By 2002, however, the Golden Age was as evanescent as Camelot. Only one in four Floridians was native to the state, whose population had doubled since Sessums’s speakership. Such circumstances are not conducive to collective memory; new citizens saw Tallahassee as a capital so thoroughly defined by partisan differences and party discipline that Speaker of the House Johnnie Byrd, a Republican elected from the same county that Democrat Sessums had represented, remarked matter-of-factly that his members were “like sheep in a way...looking for someone to tell them what to do.”...

The Golden Age was the product of a peaceful revolution, a court-ordered reapportionment that overthrew the eight-decade reign of rural legislators who, with few exceptions, were racially and economically reactionary. That their successors accomplished so much owed immeasurably to the remarkable, once-in-a-generation leadership of a man who had left the legislature to defy the seemingly impossible odds against his being elected governor. The biography of Reubin O’Donovan Askew and the history of the Golden Age are inseparable.

From Reubin Askew and the Golden Age of Florida Politics, © 2011 by Martin A. Dyckman

"Florida is such a stew of paradoxes that fiction reads like fact and fact reads like fiction. There’s enough to keep any writer busy, wondering always whether anyone cares."  
—Martin A. Dyckman

Known as a relentless investigative reporter, Martin Dyckman made many politicians tremble. The same ones probably cheered when he retired from the St. Petersburg Times in 2006 after a career that spanned nearly 47 years. 

A former colleague on the Times editorial board said: “I’ve never known a more ardent and articulate practitioner of investigative and advocacy journalism. He changed Florida with his work in the early 1970s, exposing a corrupt Supreme Court and despicable state Cabinet. Justice would have awarded him the Pulitzer Prize any one of four years.”

In 1984, the Florida Bar Foundation awarded him its Medal of Honor award for a series of articles on prison and judicial reform. Dyckman was a Florida Book Awards medalist for his 2006 book about former Gov. LeRoy Collins, which also won the Florida Historical Society’s Charlton Tebeau Award.

Dyckman’s winning book this year provides an in-depth look at Reubin O’D. Askew, a governor considered a transformative figure in Florida politics. Dyckman and his wife Ivy live in Waynesville, N.C.
Ward Larsen  
_Gold, Popular Fiction_

A former U.S. Air Force fighter pilot, Larsen flew more than 20 missions in Operation Desert Storm. He also has served as a federal law enforcement officer, is a trained aircraft accident investigator, and currently is a captain for a commercial airline.

So it’s no surprise Larsen’s stories feature intrigue, adventure, and mystery. _Fly by Night_ starts with a top-secret CIA drone crashing in Africa. A U.S. government agent goes after it—and the game is afoot.

Larsen’s three other thrillers include _The Perfect Assassin_, his 2006 debut novel that won a Florida Book Awards silver medal.

His job as an airline pilot helps his writing, Larsen said. While doing research for an essay about pioneer aviation writer Ernest Gann, Larsen learned that the author of _The High and the Mighty_ wrote because he had extra time on his overnight flights. “I had to laugh, because I started writing for the very same reason…I had a fair amount of dead time in hotel rooms, and writing seemed like a productive way to use it,” Larsen said.

He lives with his family in Sarasota.

David Hagberg  
_Silver, Popular Fiction_

Former Air Force cryptographer David Hagberg has a penchant for writing fictional thrillers that become fact. One of his books foresaw North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and another anticipated the 9/11 attacks by al-Qaeda.

In _ABYSS_, scientists pursue alternative-energy technology while wealthy fossil-fuel interests violently try to derail the project.

Hagberg’s first novel appeared in 1975, and he has since written more than 70—sometimes as many as seven or eight a year.

“Since the fourth grade when my teacher, Ms. Violet Nelson, read _The Little House on the Prairie_ and _The Little House in the Big Woods_ to us, I knew that I wanted to be a storyteller. Nothing really ever changed for me,” Hagberg said.

He developed his writing skills as a cub reporter for the Duluth, Minn., _Herald and News-Tribune_, later becoming an Associated Press editor. He also studied physics, math, and philosophy in college.

Born and reared in Duluth, Hagberg and his wife Laurie now live in Sarasota, where they like to launch sailing trips to the keys and around Florida’s West Coast.

“Florida has a terrific population of writers…Whether it’s a panel at a writing conference, or liar’s poker at lunch, our state has no shortage of talent to give inspiration and encouragement, not to mention the occasional jab in one’s literary ribs.”

—Ward Larsen
"THE GULF STREAM is a closed system," she told the camera. "The sun powers it, and the Stream distributes the energy around the Atlantic Basin. Take enough energy out of the system and redistribute it as electricity and the transfer, if it's big enough, will have an effect on weather in this hemisphere. Take enough energy out of the Humboldt Current along the east side of the Pacific, and weather will be modified there. Balance the two, along with Africa's Agulhas Current, and others in the Arctic and Antarctic and we'll stop or diminish hurricanes and typhoons, whose main purpose anyway is the distribution of energy."

Don barged out of the electronics bay forward and two decks up and raced to the aft rail that looked down on the winch deck. "Eve!" he shouted.

She looked over her shoulder.

"We've lost it!"

"What are you talking about?" she called up to him. Even from here she could see that he was extremely agitated, which was completely out of character.

"The power spiked and then went to zero!"

Something at the main winch let go with a loud bang that instantly slid up into a sickening twanging noise as if a string on a huge guitar had suddenly snapped, and Eve knew exactly what it was. The eight-millimeter titanium-sheathed cable that held the impeller-generator in place and brought the power up to the ship had somehow snapped. But that was impossible.

"Get down!" she screamed, turning back in time to see the suddenly slack cable come rocketing back aboard like a deadly cobra. One of the crewmen was struck in the chest, ripping his upper torso in half, and flinging him back against the base of the derrick in a geyser of blood.

In the blink of an eye a loop of the cable tangled in the other deckhand's legs and recoiled, lifting the man up over the stern rail and into the ocean.

"Launch the tender!" Eve screamed. Unzipping her coveralls and peeling them off, she went to the rail where she pulled off her deck shoes, and, mindless of the Fox camera trained on her nearly naked body, dove overboard.

Don had been shouting something she couldn't quite make out as she plunged into the warm water of the Stream. She spotted the deckhand about 10 feet below, moving incredibly fast to the north along the starboard side of the ship's hull. He was frantically trying to untangle himself from the cable that was dragging him toward the sea bottom 200 feet down.

Kicking hard toward him Eve was caught up in the powerful Gulf Stream, moving in excess of four knots, understanding that if she missed him the first time she would be swept away with no possibility of getting back to him against the current.

From ABYSS, © 2011 by David Hagberg
TONY’S GRAY METAL DESK was covered with 18 memos from the CIA and National Security Agency, the two agencies INR depended on for most of its raw clandestine intelligence; five cables from Kabul; and a short stack of pink telephone slips, arranged in order of priority.

Before turning to all of these competing demands, Tony retrieved Senator Billington’s recent op-ed from the New York Times website and reread it carefully from the beginning...

...John Billington was one of the few individuals Tony had met in public life who seemed to be able to take in the big picture—past, present, and future—in one view. He was one of the few who truly understood the Shakespearean quotation carved onto the entablature of the National Archives building on Constitution Avenue: “What’s past is prologue.” And by the end of the op-ed, he had certainly made his case...

The congressional inquiry into the 9/11 attacks left several secrets unanswered. The top three are Saudi Arabia’s full role in the preparation for and the execution of the plot; the kingdom’s willingness and capacity to collaborate in future terrorist actions against the United States; and why this and the prior administration conducted a cover-up that thus far has frustrated finding the answers to the first two questions. Now, there is an even more ominous ‘unknown. Does Saudi Arabia have the bomb?...
Billington had a reputation for not mincing words, and Tony was impressed that in supposed retirement, he was still so engaged. Resurfacing the suggestions that the Saudis could have been involved with the al-Qaeda attacks was pretty damn provocative. No wonder there’d been a firestorm of protest over the piece. But Saudi Arabia was another analyst’s territory. Tony had his hands full with Afghanistan...

...The BlackBerry rang. “Tony, this is John Billington.”

“Senator.” Tony was always pleased to hear his voice.

“What are you up to, young man?”

“Not feeling very young, that’s for sure. Believe it or not, I was just reading your op-ed in the Times. You seem to be the one voice of enlightenment these days. Other than that, it’s pretty grim.”

“Still trying to explain Afghanistan to the Philistines?”

“You must be tapping my phone. But you didn’t call about my problems.”

“True. I’ve got a favor to ask. A big one and I need to discuss it face-to-face.”

“Senator, honestly, I’m under water here, but if there’s something I could do—”

Billington plowed ahead, oblivious to Tony’s protests. “There have been some inexplicable developments here. For the first time, Tony, for the first time in my life, I’m feeling vulnerable. I’m scared.”

This was not standard operating procedure for John Billington. “What’s happened?” Tony asked.

“I don’t feel comfortable telling you on the phone.”

“Senator, I’m buried in this testimony, but as soon as I can break free—”

“I need your help, and time is not on my side.”

Tony was starting to get alarmed. This really wasn’t like Billington.

“Can you give me a couple of days, Senator, to put out some fires and clean things up here a little?”

“I think I can wait that long,” Billington replied. “But I need you down here as soon as possible.”

“I’ll be there,” Tony assured him.

From Keys to the Kingdom, © 2011 by Senator Bob Graham
Ryan G. Van Cleve  
Gold, Young Adult

Ryan G. Van Cleve won distinction two years ago for being the first to write a memoir about addiction to video games. “Giving up playing video games is a lot easier than you’d think. I know, I’ve done it hundreds of times,” Van Cleve says.

**Unlocked**, Van Cleve’s first novel, is a virtual prose poem that deals with another troubling issue: the threat of school violence. A high school outcast wants to steal a gun, hoping that the news, when it gets around, will enhance his reputation. The story plumbs the emotions of a youth who might be able to stop a tragedy.

Van Cleve works as a speaker, a freelance writer, a writing coach, a liberal arts faculty member at the Ringling College of Art and Design, and a digital addiction and recovery consultant. The Sarasota resident also serves as executive director of C&R Press, a nonprofit literary organization that caters to new and emerging writers.

“*I can swing by the powder-white sand and get inspired by the people, the view, the weather.*”

—Ryan G. Van Cleve

Jessica Martinez  
Silver, Young Adult

When Jessica Martinez was 3, her parents stuck a violin under her chin. “I loved it, it loved me, and then music ate up the next 15 years of my life,” Martinez says on her website.

She went on to play across Canada and the United States and perform as a soloist with professional symphonies. But she always had another love—books. “I was the girl who always had a novel tucked into her violin case.”

**Virtuosity** is her first novel, which she said she wrote when her kids were taking their naps. The novel is about a young violinist who wants to win a prestigious competition but falls in love with her top rival.

Martinez, who lives in Orlando with her husband and two children, likes to spend her days running and teaching her kids to be music lovers, too.

“I’m inspired by Florida’s extremes. Balminess and hurricanes, glitz and grits, the high-energy buzz of its cities and the slow crawl of a day at the beach—the contrasts are teeming with stories begging to be written.”

—Jessica Martinez

Alex Flinn  
Bronze, Young Adult

Alex Flinn says she writes for young adults because she never got over being one. “In my mind, I am still 13 years old, running laps on the athletic field, wearing this really baggy white gym suit,” she says.

Flinn studied opera in college and then went to law school. But writing never was far from her mind; her mother told her she should be an author when she was just 5 years old.

“I guess I must have nodded or something because, from that point on, every poem I ever wrote in school was submitted to *Highlights* or *Cricket* magazine. I was collecting rejection slips at age seven!”

**Cloaked** is about a humble cobbler who falls for a hot princess visiting Miami. The story also includes a frog-napping, enchanted swans, a rescue mission, and a special cloak that transports its wearer wherever he or she wants to go. It takes place in South Beach, the Keys, and other spots where magic rules.

In the real world, Flinn lives in Palmetto Bay with her husband, Gene, and daughters Katie and Meredith.
Margaret Cardillo  
*Gold Medal, Children’s Literature*

*Just Being Audrey*, author Margaret Cardillo’s first book, is about the career of the late Audrey Hepburn, an iconic actor celebrated for her talent, grace, and sense of style.

“When too many women use their celebrity for the wrong reasons, I wanted to celebrate a woman who used her celebrity for the right ones,” said Cardillo, a Florida native who graduated cum laude from Boston College. She cited Hepburn’s work with UNICEF and in poor villages around the world.

Cardillo, who worked for a time as associate editor at Hyperion Books for Children in New York City, moved back to Florida upon receiving the Michener Fellowship at the University of Miami MFA program in creative writing. She currently holds an assistantship at the University of Miami’s Masters in Screenwriting program.

She lives in Miami with her husband Luke Fronefield, a dog, and numerous peacocks.

“Miami is one of the most diverse places I have ever been. How all these characters live together day-in and day-out amazes me.”
— Margaret Cardillo

Marianne Berkes  
*Silver Medal, Children’s Literature*

Marianne Berkes loves frogs. So much that when she conducts presentations at schools, she will sometimes have the audience perform a frog chorus.

“When I moved to Florida I couldn’t believe the variety of sounds that came from the pond in the back of our home,” Berkes said. “Then, of course, I needed to find out which frog was making which sound.”

In *Over in Australia: Amazing Animals Down Under*, Berkes extends her love of nature far beyond her backyard. The book discusses relatively familiar creatures such as wallabies and koalas, but also features brolgas (tall wading birds) and bilbys (big-eared beasts that resemble long-nosed rabbits). She lives with her husband Roger in Hobe Sound, where the cacophony of sounds from the pond behind her house served as the inspiration for her first book, *Marsh Music*, published in 2000.

“I try to infuse the warmth, brightness, sense of adventure...into the spirit of my work.”
— Angela DiTerlizzi

Angela DiTerlizzi  
*Bronze Medal, Children’s Literature*

A self-taught make-up artist, Angela DiTerlizzi worked on *Saturday Night Live* before moving into the realm of children’s literature.

*Say What?* is about the calls of baby animals, a concept that developed because Angela and her author husband Tony DiTerlizzi live near a horse farm.

“A horse only says neigh,” Angela DiTerlizzi told the website Preview Massachusetts. “Looking out the window, I wondered how animals understand their babies’ cries. I came up with this one line: ‘When a horse says neigh, does she really mean hay?’ I took it to Tony. He said it was really good.”

She says her husband, author of the fantasy series *Spiderwick Chronicles*, has been a major influence in her writing.

“It’s fair to say that life with Tony has been an 18-year master class in children’s literature,” she said.

The couple and their daughter Sophia divide their time between Florida and western Massachusetts.

“Miami is one of the most diverse places I have ever been. How all these characters live together day-in and day-out amazes me.”
— Margaret Cardillo

“I try to infuse the warmth, brightness, sense of adventure...into the spirit of my work.”
— Angela DiTerlizzi
Kathryn Starkey is appointed to Humanities Council Board

Kathryn Starkey, a businesswoman and civic leader from New Port Richey, has been appointed to a three-year term on the Florida Humanities Council Board. Gov. Rick Scott named her to the position, one of five gubernatorial appointments on the 25-member board.

Starkey, who has lived in Pinellas and Pasco counties for more than 20 years, has an extensive background in working for improvements in education, the environment, and economic development in her community. The Consortium of Education Foundations named her Florida School Board Member of the Year for 2008-09. She has served on numerous community boards and is founder and past president of the All Children’s Hospital Guild of New Port Richey. A member of the Starkey ranching family, she leads the Starkey Land Company’s government and public relations programs.

Humanities Council receives award

The Florida Humanities Council has received this year’s Hampton Dunn Broadcasting Award from the Florida Historical Society for producing a series of audio programs commemorating Florida’s upcoming 500th anniversary. The series, “Viva Florida-500 History Moments,” consists of 100 short programs about Florida’s Spanish history and heritage. The programs are accessible to the public via several websites, including FloridaHumanities.org. Named after a longtime Florida journalist, the award recognizes outstanding broadcast programs that expand knowledge of Florida history.

Don’t miss Tampa conference on Florida’s Spanish heritage

The third of three statewide conferences leading up to Florida’s Quincentenary will be held Oct. 17–19 in Tampa. The conference events, most of which are free and open to the public, will include scholar presentations about Florida’s Spanish heritage, numerous community-oriented activities, and a workshop for 100 teachers in the Tampa Bay area. Funded by a Florida Humanities Council grant, it is being planned and administered by the Institute for the Study of Latin America at the University of South Florida in partnership with the Tampa Bay History Center. Details will be publicized prior to the conference date.

Two previous grant-funded conferences were held in recent months by the University of Miami and St. Augustine’s Flagler College. The goal of the conferences: to advance the knowledge Floridians have of their Spanish heritage in preparation for next year’s statewide Viva Florida commemoration of explorer Ponce de León’s landing on our Atlantic shore in 1513. This marked the beginning of the European presence in North America.

Christopher Still’s design wins Viva Florida poster contest

Florida artist Christopher Still, well known for his portrayals of Florida history, created the design selected by public vote to be the official Viva Florida 500 poster. Still’s design received more than a third of the more than 3,000 votes cast for the five finalists in our February online vote.

Still, a resident of Tarpon Springs, used images from his historical paintings that appear on the walls of the Florida House of Representatives chambers. He explained the poster-design concept in this way: “This image centers around the hibiscus flower, being spread by the Seminole woman of the State Seal. Ponce De León looks on as he names La Florida after the feast of Flowers in 1513. He lifts the 23-star flag that will be raised in 1821 when Florida becomes a U.S. Territory following the signing of the Adams Onis Treaty with Spain. The Seminole woman’s arms are adorned with the succession of State Seals from the territorial period on. The rising moon and space shuttle remind us of Florida’s place in modern exploration as the surrounding British, French, and Spanish Flags remind us of the explorers from the past.”

The statewide Viva Florida 500 poster-design contest was co-sponsored by the Florida Humanities Council and the Florida Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs.
Our PrimeTime family reading and discussion program was recently honored with an award from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, the creator of the program that now is being offered to underserved families in many states around the country. Over the past eight years we have graduated 2,500 participants in 58 PrimeTime programs at public libraries around Florida—and we continue to expand to new locations.

PrimeTime brings children and their parents together to read and discuss award-winning children’s books with real-world themes. The program’s six weekly sessions, led by storytellers and scholars, promote discussions that connect literature to participants’ lives. It is designed to reinforce the role of the family in reading and has demonstrated great success in turning participants into active library users.

Erica Shepherd, a recent PrimeTime participant in Pinellas County, said the experience has indeed sparked her daughters’ interest in reading. “They thirst for that now at bedtime, that story time,” she said. Shepherd, her husband William, and their three daughters attended the program in St. Petersburg’s South Branch Library earlier this year.

New friendships developed because of the program, and Shepherd said she was sad to see it end. “I got emotional, to be honest,” she said. The overall PrimeTime experience far exceeded her expectations, she said.

As part of our expansion of PrimeTime, we added a pilot program this year for French-speaking Haitian families, funded in part by the Shell Oil Corporation. The program, organized jointly by the French Heritage Language Program and the Haitian Cultural Arts Alliance, took place in Miami’s Little Haiti area. While the majority of our programs are in English, we have also offered a few Spanish-language programs.

Thus far we have sponsored PrimeTime programs in the following counties: Alachua, Duval, Hillsborough, Orange, Pinellas, Sarasota, Broward, Putnam, Hendry, Martin, and Miami-Dade.

For more information about PrimeTime and a current schedule of programs, please visit www.floridahumanities.org.

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Excerpt from:

Magpies

By Lynne Barrett

East of Town, in the woods Tom Baugh and Bill Fenwick had roamed as boys, was one of the original “sights” of the area, a sinkhole known as Old Crater because early travelers ascribed it to a meteor, where a thousand years ago the land had collapsed to the aquifer. This sink, of course, looked nothing like the raw wound at Spoonbill. Trees that grew up out of its sides formed a canopy. The water in its depths was rumored to be bottomless, to be haunted by sacrificed Tequesta maidens or ambushed conquistadors, to be fed by pure and magical springs, to have patches of quicksand, to lead to caves in which was hidden pirate treasure.

Parents warned against swimming in Old Crater. But the boys had boundless confidence—ineluctable, now Tom thought about it—and they explored. Others before them had made a pathway through the greenery, spiraling down to the water. When they dove, they found springs, and, where there was sand, shark’s teeth. Once, swimming underwater, they popped up into a cave at the western edge of the sinkhole with a ledge they could sit on, and as they watched they saw the water moved, sluggishly yes, but always southwestward.

Tom theorized that the water here might connect eventually to the Little Peregrine, that these springs might feed an underground river. “No way to know but to try,” said Wick, and they filled their lungs and dove, their bodies slim darters slipping downstream, going on past caverns, possible channels, as if they knew the way, till the choice was turn back or drown, but they saw light and came up in another sink—smaller, a hole six feet across and ten feet up, its sides erode and crumbly.

“We can just dive and go back,” said Tom, but Wick—and maybe this was the moment he took the lead?—found footing on an outcropping near water level, and made a stirrup with his hands, and Tom, lighter, stepped up, then stood on Wick’s shoulders and hoisted himself to the edge. He grabbed on with his legs to a bush there, nothing that should have held, really, reached down, and grabbed Wick’s hand, and Wick climbed right up and over him, then lifted him to the top. They stood in an overgrown spot they hadn’t seen before, with the sun just overhead, and laughed, sparkling with ancient water and immortality.

From Magpies, © 2011 by Lynne Barrett
EXCERPT FROM:

THE REVENGE OF THE RADIOACTIVE LADY

By Elizabeth Stuckey-French

BY THE TIME MARYLOU AHEARN FINALLY MOVED into the little ranch house in Tallahassee, she’d spent countless hours trying to come up with the best way to kill Wilson Spriggs. The only firm decision she’d made, however, was that proximity was crucial. You couldn’t kill someone if you lived in a different state. So she flew down from Memphis to Tallahassee and bought a house on the edge of Wilson’s neighborhood. Doing so had been no problem, because she had a chunk of money left from the government settlement as well as her retirement and social security. She furnished her new place quickly with generic “big warehouse sale” furniture. Back in Memphis she rounded up a graduate student couple she’d met at church—a husband and wife who both needed to give their spectacles a good cleaning—to house-sit, and then she transferred her base of operations to Tallahassee, informing friends only that she’d be taking an extended vacation.

Completing her task in Florida, unfortunately, was taking a while. Every morning when Marylou and her Welsh corgi, Buster, left their house at 22 Reeve’s Court and set out on their walk toward Wilson Spriggs’s house at 2208 Friar’s Way, Marylou chanted to herself: Today’s the day. Today’s the day he’ll suffer and die. Every morning she fully believed that by the time she’d walked the three blocks to Wilson’s house she’d have figured out how to do him in, despite the fact that she’d been setting out on this very walk a few times a day for the past two weeks and it was nearly May and the best method and right time had yet to present themselves.

She tried to spur herself on with angry thoughts. Would she feel better after she’d killed him? Darn tootin’. She didn’t expect to go around giddy, not after all that had happened, but she expected to feel relieved, to have a sense of accomplishment, like when, fifteen years ago, she’d stepped out the doors of Humes High School, never to have to spoon-feed Chaucer to tenth graders again. It must be a good sign that she was now living in a neighborhood where the streets were named after Chaucer’s characters. The Canterbury Tales had returned to mark this next big passage in her life.

From Revenge of the Radioactive Lady, © 2011 by Elizabeth Stuckey-French
Caren Umbarger
Bronze, General Fiction

A musician who began playing the violin at age 5, Caren Umbarger took several years to write Coming To, her first novel. Trying to attract publishers and agents wearied her, so she self-published the book.

“The process...was very much like giving birth,” Umbarger said. “You know going into it that it’s going to be intense; while you’re in the middle of it, you can’t remember why you thought you wanted to do it in the first place; and now that it’s finished, all the hard work was worth it.”

At age 9, Umbarger began a long pen-pal relationship with her favorite author, and this helped spark her interest in writing.

She is now artistic director of Palm Coast’s 300-student Flagler Youth Orchestra. She lives with her husband Paul in St. Augustine and can be found most days biking on the beach at low tide.

“From the beauty and warmth that surround me here, my swirling dreams can become stories and I am set free to write.”
— Caren Umbarger
Books for Summer Reading

**Adult**

- **Conflict of Interest**
  A Florida mystery
  Terry Lewis
  Now in paperback and e-book

- **Secrets of San Blas**
  A Florida mystery
  Charles Farley

- **Presidential Information**
  A Florida mystery
  Terry Lewis
  Now in paperback and e-book

- **Orlok**
  The story of Genghis Khan’s general
  Don Dandrea
  Now in paperback and e-book

- **Presidents in Florida**
  James C. Clark
  How the Presidents Have Shaped Florida and How Florida Has Influenced the Presidents

**Young Adult**

- **The Reaper of St. George Street**
  A graphic novel
  Andre Frattino

- **Olivia Brophie and the Pearl of Tagelus**
  Christopher Tozier

- **Kidnapped in Key West**
  Edwina Raffa & Annelle Rigsby

- **The Treasure of Amelia Island**
  M.C. Finotti

- **The Spy Who Came In from the Sea**
  Peggy Nolan

- **Solomon**
  Marilyn Bishop Shaw

**Guidebooks for Summer Travel**

*Florida’s Rivers*

- **Caloosahatchee River Guidebook**
  Kevin M. McCarthy

- **Hillsborough River Guidebook**
  Kevin M. McCarthy

- **St. Johns River Guidebook**
  Kevin M. McCarthy

- **Suwannee River Guidebook**
  Kevin M. McCarthy

*The Carolinas and Georgia*

- **Living Beaches of Georgia and the Carolinas**
  Blair and Dawn Witherington

- **Seashells of Georgia and the Carolinas**
  Blair and Dawn Witherington

- **Coastal North Carolina**
  Terrance Zepke

- **Coastal South Carolina**
  Terrance Zepke

- **Lighthouses of the Carolinas 2nd Ed.**
  Terrance Zepke

- **Ghosts of the Carolinas**
  Terrance Zepke

Patrick Smith is the winner of the Florida Humanities Council’s 2012 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award. The judges felt that “Patrick Smith’s books have been hugely significant to the citizens of Florida... [and] that A Land Remembered is an iconic Florida book that has resonated with generations of Floridians.”

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Sometimes called “the wizard of Florida archaeology,” Jerald Milanich has published more than 20 books and has written more than 100 articles and book chapters about his favorite subject. Nina Root is director emerita of the American Museum of Natural History’s research library.

*Hidden Seminoles* is a trove of rare photographs taken of Seminoles from 1905 to 1910—and the entrancing story of A.W. and Julian Dimock, a father-son team who left the Gilded Age’s Wall Street to explore the Everglades and the lives of the Indians who lived there.

The photos’ historical importance “is beyond question,” wrote Tina M. Osceola, former chief historic resources officer for the Seminole Tribe of Florida. “But to us, they have even greater value, for they are photographs of our ancestors, the people from whom we are descended.”

The book developed as a result of Milanich’s 2007 meeting with Root, who oversaw the museum library that housed the Dimock photos. Besides bringing the images before the public, the book tells how and why the Dimocks left their world to enter a strange, new one.

Milanich, who retired as a University of Florida professor in 2003, is curator emeritus of archaeology at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville. He is married to anthropologist Maxine Margolis and lives part of the year in New York City. Root, in her own words, says that she is a confirmed New Yorker.

“Florida’s varied natural settings and the diverse native American cultures that have lived here for millennia offer a living library from which we can learn about people, cultures, and nature.”

— Jerald T. Milanich
Perhaps the most surprising thing about Stephen Kampa is that he plays harmonica in a blues band called the Pick-ups. Daytona Beach News-Journal writer Rick De Yampert wrote this upon his initial encounter with the poet: “This guy ain’t no blues man! He looks like...he’s got some highfalutin’ master of fine arts degree in poetry and creative writing.” Which is exactly what Kampa does have. Kampa, who is from Daytona Beach, holds degrees from Carlton College and Johns Hopkins University. Cracks in the Invisible, his first book, is as whimsical as, well, maybe the idea of a serious poet blowing blues harp in a biker bar.

“There is certainly an image that people have specifically of blues players, and musicians in general,” Kampa said. “I’ve always thought that’s very helpful—I have the element of surprise on my side.”

“In Florida, I’ve learned much about art through the musicians I grew up jamming with...and I try to carry [their] wisdom into my poetry.” — Stephen Kampa

Three times in the past five years, David Kirby has won a Florida Book Awards medal, including golds for his work in 2007 and 2008. His most recent winner, Talking about Movies with Jesus, has been described as Kirby’s ongoing “personal carnival,” perhaps an allusion to the poet’s youthful urge to run away and join a circus—but never finding one he liked.

“Reading David Kirby’s poetry is like being at a really great party where people are smart and funny and sad and somehow made out of both real life and some Holy Spirit from outer space,” wrote poet Matthew Dickman.

A legendary English professor at Florida State University, Kirby’s peers named him a Distinguished Professor, the highest honor faculty members can bestow upon a colleague. Kirby lives in Tallahassee with his wife, poet Barbara Hamby.

Gianna Russo, once dubbed the “doyen of Tampa poets” by the weekly newspaper Creative Loafing, is the founder of Yellow Jacket Press, which publishes poetry. MoonFlower is a powerful collection dealing with powerful subjects—a married lover, death, the anguish of loss, and resilience, for example—and their settings sometimes hint at the familiar scenes in Russo’s hometown, Tampa.

Russo has taught English and creative writing at both college and high school levels, and she developed the creative writing program at Blake Magnet School of the Arts, where she taught for nine years. Russo currently is Curator of Education for the Plant Museum at the University of Tampa.

When she isn’t writing, she likes to work in her herb and flower garden. She and her husband Jeff Karon live in Tampa.

“The natural world is sacred in the way that poetry is sacred and invariably calls forth from me a response—one that I hope does it justice.” — Gianna Russo
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CONFESS, I DIDN’T reach out and find Alligator Point. It grabbed me like a panther does her cub—by the scruff of the neck.

In my childhood memories, light glints off dark waves, swells of water boom onshore like muffled and arrhythmic bass drums. In fact, this thin peninsula jutting off the Florida peninsula molded me as a child and as an adult.

At age nine, after having read the poem “Dover Beach,” I stood thigh deep in the Gulf and cried, yearning for words to describe what it meant to look out at sea and try to understand my place in the world. Maybe that day I realized I wanted more than anything to become a writer.

Alligator Point looks as vulnerable as Florida does on a world map, bordered on three sides by water. The beach runs south off the Panhandle, then turns immediately west to parallel the main coastline. A nine-mile skinny alligator tail of land surrounded by vast nutrient-filled waters.

If you don’t know the area, the Gulf there is fed by the Ochlockonee, the Sopchoppy, the St. Marks, and the Wakulla rivers. Because of this fresh water full of rich plant life, upland pines and oaks grow right next to the beaches, making room for bluebirds and mockingbirds. Bay scallops taste sweet here, and oysters tend towards plump, juicy. Shrimp here taste rich like the bottom wealth they feed on.

The road to Alligator Point is as easy to miss as a dirt road to nowhere. You catch the fox-sly road off U.S. 98 at the Franklin County side of the Ochlockonee Bay Bridge about 40 miles east of Apalachicola. You go from unknown Northwest Florida to even more unknown Northwest Florida. Luckily, Alligator Point is adjacent to undeveloped natural environments: Bald Point State Park, Tate’s Hell State Forest, Apalachicola National Forest, and St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

My family came to “our” beach house there in the early 1960s; my dad’s real estate company purchased two lots at about a thousand dollars each, right on the Gulf. By serendipity, at that time one of the Realtors happened to sell a lot in town with a 1940s house on it that the buyer wanted removed. The real estate company had the house picked up in town and plopped down on one of the beach lots.

No one believes this now, but the movers put the house on the wrong lot—one belonging to someone else. The brokers bargained with the lot owner to leave the house there, trade lots, and...
share a well. They reached a gentleman’s agreement on a “land swap.” In other words, the lot and the house were not considered to be worth much.

But to me they were worth a great deal. In the early 1960s, the beach had expanses of soft white sand, curried dunes, the whoosh of tides. I pumped my short legs up and down the tide lines, singing, cartwheeling, searching. I discovered washed-up baby sharks, calico crabs, diaphanous jellyfish to poke at and puzzle over. I collected giant cockles, translucent jingle shells, and brilliant purple sea snails with rounded whorls of such a luscious violet that ancient Greeks used the fluid produced by the snails to dye clothing.

I was satisfied by simply being there. My sister, who was seven years old at the time, remembers Alligator Point this way: “Sand in my hair, sand in the backs of my knees, sand in my pants.” My other sister, two years old then, must remember herself shaping sandcastles on the shore in her diapers. Our brother wasn’t born yet.

I was a stringy-limbed, guileless tomboy who set a bad big-sister example by squinting at the sun and, sagged into an old inner tube, floating out way too far. I encouraged my sisters to do the same. My mother remembers that I was always breaking the rule of not going out beyond waist-deep water. I swam rowdily, deeply, doing handstands and back flips on an unseeable sea bottom and into waves buoyant and cool during the stifling summer heat.

One time, when my mother glanced out from the porch and saw my sisters and me floating out too far, she spotted a shark fin trolling near us. My baby sister was in an inner tube and had an orange Styrofoam bubble strapped to her back, while we older two hung onto the same inner tube. My mother ran to the beach, calling us frantically. How would she ever save us from an attack?

“Come in!” she called over and over. We couldn’t hear her. Eventually, we saw her waving us in. “Come in! COME IN!” she shouted. She says now that those seconds stretched longer than any she’s ever experienced. We lingered, she panicked. Finally, resentful and ignorant, our arms and legs brought us safely to shore.
My mother always dreaded going to Alligator Point, although she didn’t often let on. She had to lug fresh water from Tallahassee for drinking and cooking. She had no friends at the sparsely populated beach. Inside the house, when the breeze died, she wondered how she ever ended up there without even a window-unit air conditioner. She had no place to do laundry and, at times, had no car.

In those days, dad spent weekends on the beach and drove to town for the workweek, returning to the beach on Friday afternoons. Dad’s way to relax from the stress of supporting the family involved sitting on the porch and listening to waves rumble in and out. My parents, who were raised near the east coast of Florida, considered the Gulf’s modest beaches as shorelines to a big pond.

But to me the place was so much more—and it soon became apparent that others felt that way, too. People began coming to the area during Florida’s post–World War II population boom—when ex-GIs and their families began moving to this subtropical paradise where many did their basic training. Alligator Point was used by Camp Gordon Johnston as a training ground for amphibious vehicle landings during the war to prep for D-Day.

Soldiers shot up and bombed the heck out of it in some spots in the early 1940s. We kids in the 1960s would find bullets when we played in the sand.

Our beach house was sold by the end of my teen years. (I still brag that it’s the ugliest house there.) But I still get to stay on the Point occasionally, because my mother-in-law built her retirement home there, in the tall pines and palms between the bay and the Gulf.

Hurricanes, although destructive, have saved Alligator Point from over-development. When Hurricane Dennis’s surge put much of the Point under water in 2005, my husband and his mother were trapped in her house. Luckily, they survived and lost only a submerged car. They did watch as one house on the beach caved and finally collapsed into the Gulf during the storm. For four years the Point looked ravaged, in places resembling a moonscape without vegetation. The only convenience store on the peninsula gave up the ghost. Nothing sold, not lots, not houses, not planned communities. Then slowly nature revived the place. The sea grasses and purple thistles came back. The palms and pines have always survived a saltwater soaking. The songbirds and seabirds returned to build nests, to feed, and to create a jazz noise.

Today, I enjoy Alligator Point the way I did as a child. I think of it as the place that welcomes me back to myself. Eying the horizon, I spot cormorants winging high above or watch anhingas buoyed by waves, and suddenly plunging below the surface for fish. The pelicans amaze me most as athletes, winging across the water and, without pause, doing a 90-degree turn.

They dive straight down into water like Olympic divers to net their catch with huge beaks and expansive throats. These prehistoric birds still thrive there.

On the Point, wild things are possible. Those of us who still live and visit there hope condominiums never take the place of our scraggly spontaneous community.

MARY JANE RYALS has written five books, including the novel Cookie & Me, which last year won a Florida Book Award and a Florida Publishers Association Award. She is Poet Laureate of the Big Bend of Florida and currently is working on a book about Florida Panhandle culture and food.
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A blast of humid air hit my face as I walked out of the Tampa airport with my parents, each of us with two suitcases in tow. We were greeted by a stranger welcoming us into our new life. She drove us to a motel room that we would call home for the next 10 days. That was almost 15 years ago. We were war refugees from the Balkans—Serbs from Croatia.

The civil war erupted in former Yugoslavia in 1991 and concluded in 1995 but not before it damaged millions of lives, produced thousands of casualties, turned cities into ashes, and changed the fate of everyone who once lived there. In August of 1995 the war escalated in Croatia, forcing more than 200,000 people to leave their homes in a matter of days. We were among them and sought refuge with relatives in neighboring Serbia, a home away from home. But that country was struggling with its own aftermath of the war, trying to accommodate a half-million refugees, and it felt more like a shelter than home.

If I look back on that time, several moments clearly stand out. I remember the day we left. We had the biggest farewell entourage at the Belgrade airport—grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins who felt and still feel more like siblings than cousins, and friends. I remember saying goodbye to each individually, and each goodbye felt like another sharp tear to my heart. I remember my father telling me not to look back as we approached the terminal. The 15-year-old in me didn’t listen and turned around anyway. I still wish I hadn’t.

I remember how much we laughed the night before as we attempted to pack our life in six suitcases. Each of us had our perception of what was important to bring, what we would need, what we could leave behind.

I remember how happy I was a couple of months prior to that when, after two years of waiting, we received the approval letter for residence in the United States from the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees in conjunction with the Dioceses of Catholic Charities. The final destination was to be St. Petersburg, Florida. I remember how quickly the feeling of guilt overshadowed the happiness—a feeling that still trails behind: that I left my own family, traditions, culture.

I remember spending the majority of my childhood in a war-torn country. My cousin and I planned an escape route to use if sirens started during school; we would wait for one another in between the buildings and then run home. Sirens became a part of my everyday life. Just a few years earlier, we contemplated an escape route to use during a game of hide-and-seek.

Moments like these defined me, but they also prepared me for what was to come in my life in the United States.
They prepared me for those 10 days spent with my parents in a small motel room in St. Petersburg as we patiently waited for our apartment to become available. They prepared me to walk into a modest two-bedroom apartment with bare white walls and reminisce about the baby-blue teenage room I left behind when war intensified and we fled.

As I spent a few days in the motel room waiting to become an American student, I watched afternoon talk shows, trying to grasp the language and to prepare myself for my new peers. I remember thinking how their problems seemed so different from mine. Their problems seemed scarier. They dealt with teenage peer pressure—something I avoided while dealing with the effects of the war.

Memories of living in a war-torn country, and surviving, prepared me to face a culture shock in a new country where I barely knew the language and would be a freshman in high school—a trying time for any teenager. As Florida experienced a surge of refugees from various ethnicities in the mid-1990s, my high school became a melting pot of nations. We all sought refuge in each other in our English-as-a-Second-Language classes—which we used as training wheels until we were ready to ride on our own. I left the program in my second year and became a sophomore in high school along with everyone else. But, accompanying me was the determination to succeed, to belong, to prevail.

My memories also prepared me to focus on journalism as my major in college, and be the only one in class who wasn’t from here. I looked back on that 15-year-old who first arrived in this country with her thick accent, and she became my drive. They prepared me for those ever-so-familiar questions: “Where are you from?” “Why are you here?” and the reactions that followed after my not-so-common answers.

They prepared me to deal with the unpleasant moments one experiences in a new country—or was that just in life itself?

But they didn’t prepare me for losing bits and pieces of what I left behind there in Serbia—my family.

Five years after that tearful goodbye, I returned to Serbia with painful knots in my stomach. It now was an established home to family who stayed behind. No longer a child and already adapting to my new life, I wondered if they would recognize me and if I would recognize them. They said that I seemed shorter to them, but I know they seemed taller to me. Photographs can be deceiving that way.

After a few weeks of repeatedly answering the same question: “How is it over there?” in not-so-perfect Serbian, I slowly started re-adapting. Soon, I felt as if I had never left. I returned to Florida that summer, my English now rusty, and felt the familiar old nostalgia over the new memories of being back there.

And then, just like that, in a few months I was back into my new life again, being in college and using English as my first language. After all—I wrote, prayed, dreamed in English. All of my lists, thoughts, diaries were written in English. All my emotions came flooding in English regardless if I was happy or sad. It felt more real. It still does.

Years passed, with many trips there and many returns here, each
bringing different emotions and experiences. Each trip was shorter as I focused more on my studies, then my interests, then my career—my life. I began to cherish the small-town feel of St. Petersburg—similar to my first hometown in Croatia and the opposite of the busy, rushed lifestyle of Belgrade, my adopted hometown in Serbia.

But, somehow I always felt as though I was living two lives, being two people, halfway here and halfway there.

And then I fell in love, with an American. For the first time I felt that I completely belonged here. I realized that Florida is my home and a place where I am building a new life here—not losing, but incorporating, pieces of my old life there.

My friends are no longer friends just because they come from there. Some were born here and some were born there. They vary in cultures, nationalities, and experiences. As my fiancé and I gather for a birthday, holiday, or either of two Christmases—his on December 25th and mine on January 7th—we embrace our differences and celebrate the joys and milestones with our family and friends. These celebrations are often bittersweet for an ever-present realization that I am not there for my nieces’ and nephews’ first baby steps, first words, or first birthdays. Those things can’t be planned. I just have to make do and experience them in person on my terms when I am there. I’ve learned to appreciate and read pictures until they tell a story. I’ve appreciated love despite miles, years, and experiences between us.

After a half of my life spent there, and half of it lived here, I have fully adjusted to the Florida life. Along the way, the late-October humidity, the adjustment shocks, and the language barriers were replaced by sunshine, cultural richness, and endless opportunities.

IRENA MILASINOVIC, a graduate of the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, works for a college of law and is a freelance graphic designer, writer, and photographer.
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