

Tropical Stars

Florida's New Wave of Crime Writers

by Stuart McIver

I tell my students I can't imagine a story that doesn't grow out of the place it is portraying," said Les Standiford, author of 14 books, including the John Deal series, and director of the Creative Writing Program at Miami's Florida International University. "Place is as important as character and the story itself. In fact, place *becomes* a character—in all its aspects, atmosphere, physical setting, time, weather."

And what a colorful char-

acter Florida is! Swamps filled with alligators and cottonmouth moccasins contrast with the glittering cities boasting modern skyscrapers. The sanitized perfection of Disneyworld gives way farther south to the laid-back funkiness of Key West. Marinas packed with

million-dollar yachts are just down the highways from suburbs filled with flimsy new houses waiting to be blown away in the next hurricane.



Jill Marvel

Jill Marvel

Weirdness: A Natural Resource

From morning papers and evening TV newscasts, crime leaps out at Floridians every day. All states have crime but Florida introduces startling variations. A motel guest complains of the smell in his room and a closer look reveals a body underneath the bed. A man cuts off his wife's head and throws it at a cop. In the carnival town of Gibsonton a sideshow performer known as Lobster Boy is murdered by a hit man hired by the Human Blockhead.

The natives have naturally been influenced by the riches surrounding them. The tiny community of Oklawaha chose as its historical event most worthy of reenacting a bloody shootout between the FBI and the Ma Barker Gang. A T-shirt asks "Where is Bum Farto?" to honor a vanished Key West fire chief convicted of selling cocaine at his fire station. "There's so much material here that if you read the papers and have half a



Danny Turner

brain, the plots are sitting right there," said Carl Hiaasen, a third-generation Floridian who is a columnist for the *Miami Herald* and a novelist for the connoisseurs of weird. "You can get a good idea for a novel just walking from one concourse to another in Miami International Airport."

Many Floridians believe the Sunshine State has now surpassed California as America's mystery capital. In her whispery voice, Edna Buchanan, author of a bestselling series set in Miami, declared, "South Florida is now to mysteries what L.A. was in the days of Chandler and Hammett. There is no place as dangerous, as treacherous and, in so many ways, as innocent."

Early Days

This dominance of the crime and mystery field is a relatively recent phenomenon al-

There are roughly three periods in Florida literary history—before *Miami Vice*, during *Miami Vice*, and after *Miami Vice*."

—James W. Hall



though there has been successful Florida mystery fiction in the past. In 1939 Davis Dresser, writing as Brett Halliday, introduced a Miami private eye named Mike Shayne. More than 70 Shayne books followed. Other writers who used Florida as a setting included Leslie Charteris, who wrote the Saint series, George Harmon Coxe, Stephen Ransom, Mignon Eberhart and Damon Runyon. The most popular American mystery writer in the first half

MacDonald published *The Deep Blue Goodbye*, the first of his 21 Travis McGee novels. McGee, wrote MacDonald, was "a knight in slightly tarnished armor—a thinking man's Robin Hood." McGee traveled throughout the state righting wrongs and introducing his millions of devoted readers to Florida's wonders—and mounting ecological problems. The public attention MacDonald focused on the latter is at least as great a part of his legacy as his likable "salvage consultant" hero.

Today, Randy Wayne White is following MacDonald's lead with hard-hitting stories featuring Doc Ford, a marine biologist based on picturesque Sanibel Island. A former Sanibel fishing guide, White writes with authority on ecological problems of the marine world in such gripping novels as *Captiva* and *Shark River*. Branching out from the writing business, White recently opened a restaurant on Sanibel Island called Doc Ford's Sanibel Rum Bar & Grille, a sports bar that serves gourmet food.

Carl Hiaasen attacks environmental despoilers with fiendish glee in his best-selling novels. His satiric wit has also targeted revolutionaries, the tourism industry, cosmetic surgeons, tournament fishermen, and hurricane profiteers. Of course, hapless public servants are always

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of the twentieth century, Mary Roberts Rinehart, spent her winters on Useppa Island in Pine Island Sound, but her short story, "Murder and the South Wind," was her only fiction set in Florida.

Florida Knights

It was not until 1964 that Florida started to blossom as a prime locale for mysteries. That was the year that John D.

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Elena Seibert



TV legend has it that *Miami Vice* (1984-1989) was born when NBC programming chief Brandon Tartikoff gave director Michael Mann a two-word concept: "MTV cops." Above, the boys of summer themselves: Det. Ricardo Tubbs (Philip Michael Thomas, left) and Det. Sonny Crockett (Don Johnson).

good for a storyline. *Striptease* takes place in his birthplace, Fort Lauderdale, and was inspired by the difficulties of a local politician. And who else but Hiaasen would turn a frozen lizard into a weapon? (Basket Case, 2002) The promisingly titled *Skinny Dip* will arrive in stores this July.

Another author who stresses environmental themes is James W. Hall. A member of Florida International University's creative writing faculty, Hall taught a course

about bestsellers, found he liked to read them and moved on to writing them. His impressive output includes *Under Cover of Daylight*, *Body Language* and *Rough Draft*. In 2003, St. Martin's published a book of his essays about Florida whose title says it all: *Hot Damn!: Alligators in the Casino, Nude Women in the Grass, How Seashells Changed the Course of History, and Other Dispatches from Paradise*.

Vice Squad

Hall identifies a two-decade old television phenomenon as a driving force in the current popularity of Florida as a setting is. Starting in 1984, *Miami Vice* ran in prime time for six years, mesmerizing viewers with flashy cars, flashier women, boatloads of cocaine, glimpses of an alligator named Elvis, and two stylish detectives named Crockett and Tubbs.

Said Hall: "There are roughly three periods in Florida literary history—before *Miami Vice*, during *Miami Vice*, and after *Miami Vice*."

Several significant South Florida writers who moved onstage during the *Miami Vice* era including Elmore Leonard, Carl Hiaasen, Edna Buchanan and the late Charles Willeford.

Willeford has been called the last of the great pulp writers. After years of paperback output he finally achieved mainstream suc-

cess in the 1980s with his quirky, violent novels featuring Miami homicide detective Hoke Moseley. Titles to look for include *New Hope for the Dead*, *Sideswipe*, and *Miami Blues*, which found its way to Hollywood in a film featuring Alec Baldwin as the psychotic bad guy.

Elmore Leonard is now almost as identified with North Palm Beach as he is with Detroit. He captures the sound and the action of

the Gold Coast with characters ranging from a Palm Beacher who kills a Haitian gardener to an unconventional Cracker judge and even to alligator poachers in Belle Glade. The Florida-set *Out of Sight* was made into a memorable George Clooney/Jennifer Lopez film and is the basis for the current TV show *Karen Cisco*.

Tampa's Tim Dorsey has joined Hiaasen in the special mystery genre that he refers to as "whacked out." Dorsey's titles reflect his joyful approach—*Cadillac Beach*, *The Stingray Shuffles*, *Florida Roadkill*, *Hammerhead Ranch Motel*, *Orange Crush* and *Triggerfish Twist*.

Crime Spree

Since the late 1980s—the "after *Miami Vice*" era—an impressive number of mystery writers have come forward throughout Florida. The Sunshine State can now point with pride to roughly a hundred published mystery authors in the state, according to author Carolyn Cain (*The Secret at the Break-*



Carolina Garcia-Aguilera

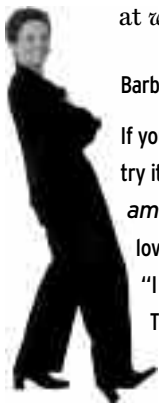
Sweet Nothings Translated

at www.BarbaraParker.com

Barbara Parker says:

If you say "sweetheart" or "darling" in English, try it in Spanish: *amorcito, mi querida, mi amor, mi vida*. They mean: my little love, my loved one, my love, my life. *Te quiero* means "I love you" (literally, "I want you").

They sound better in Spanish, don't they?



ers Hotel), a former president of the Florida Chapter of Mystery Writers of America.

Among these is Les Standiford (*Havana Run*), whose FIU writing program can point to such distinguished alumni as Dennis Lehane and Florida novelist Barbara Parker. Standiford has created a series featuring John Deal, described by the author as "an honest building contractor." Deal has spent much of his adult life trying to rebuild the Miami construction firm that his late mob-connected father ruined. Talk about a sense of place—what could

be more Floridian than land swindles and construction scams?

Contents Under Pressure

While in the past men predominated among Sunshine State mystery writers, Carolyn Cain says that's no longer the case. Women now constitute about half of Florida's mystery perpetrators and several make regular climbs up the bestseller lists.

Among the leaders are three women who have built the ethnic and cultural tensions of modern Florida right into the lives of their characters.

Edna Buchanan (*The Ice Maiden, You Only Die Twice*) offers Britt Montero, a journalist whose father was a Cuban revolutionary killed by a Castro firing squad. Her mother, from whom she is estranged, is an old-line South Florida Anglo Episcopalian. But it is Britt's adventures as a adrenaline-addicted police reporter that really brings home the complexity of today's Miami. Buchanan, of course, developed her eye for local color as a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for *The Miami Herald*.

Barbara Parker (*Suspicion of Vengeance, Suspicion of Madness*) delves into cultural and ethnic issues through the relationship between Anglo lawyer Gail Connor and Anthony Quintana, a Cuban defense attorney. The attraction between this high-powered duo adds heat to the high tension plots in Florida's lush landscape.

Carolina Garcia-Aguilera (*Havana Heat, Bitter Sugar*) looks at South Florida through the eyes of Lupe Solano, a young Cuban-American who has become a P.I. much to the chagrin of her wealthy, conservative family. Lupe has a refreshingly high-end existence for a P.I., wheeling around Miami in a Mercedes and fending off (or not) the advance of dashing handsome men. Garcia-Aguilera offered the stand-alone thriller *Luck of the Draw* in 2003, again drawing on her Cuban background.

Young Guns

Since the blossoming of the Florida mystery in the 1980s many other mystery writers has emerged throughout Florida: from Miami, James Grippando and Dirk Wyle; from Key West, John Leslie, Laurence Shames and Tom Corcoran; from Broward County, Elaine Viets, Nancy Cohen, Richard

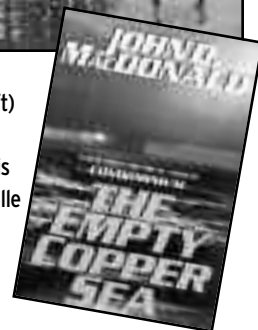


“No one who chances upon the phenomenon of Stiltsville for the first time will ever forget the sight of homes that hover above the water, miles from any shore, like structures from a dream.”

Les Standiford, in a 1998 letter to the Florida Review Board urging the preservation of the historic structures in Biscayne Bay. <www.stiltsville.org>



Les Standiford (top left) brings environmental issues to the fore in his work. Above: A Stiltsville home.



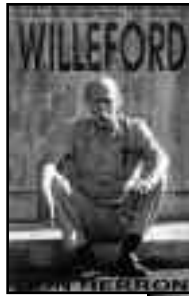
Above left: John D. MacDonald (1916-1986) was the godfather of the modern Florida mystery.

Left: Randy Wayne White's Pine Island home on Florida's Gulf Coast. Bottom: Randy Wayne White



“I’m starting a journal about what it’s like to live where I live: an old Cracker house built on short stilts, on a Calusa Indian mound, on an acre of old tropical growth overlooking the bay. From where I write this, I can look across that water and see Captiva and Sanibel on the horizon—the islands where I was a fishing guide for many years.”

—Randy Wayne White at <www.docford.com>



Echoing his winningly-titled *New Hope for the Dead*, the literary reputation of Charles Willeford (1919-1988) is on the rise. Above: Warren Oates (left) and Charles Willeford on the film set of *Cockfighter* (1974). According to Willeford, *Cockfighter* has the distinction of being the only film that producer Roger Corman ever lost money on. Above right: a well-regarded 1997 biography by Don Heron. Left: *Miami Blues* (1990) which starred Alec Baldwin, Fred Ward and Jennifer Jason Leigh was based on the first of Willeford's sardonic Hoke Mosely novels.

Smitten, Cynthia Smith, Christine Kling, Kristy Montee and Jonathan King; from Boca Raton, Daniel Keyes and J.R. Ripley (Glenn Meganck); from Wellington, T.J. MacGregor and Rob MacGregor; from Boynton Beach, Laura Belgrave; from Vero Beach, David Hagberg and Martha Powell; from Orchid Beach, Stuart Woods; from Melbourne, Carolyn Cain; from Titusville, Anna Flowers-Brotemarkle; from Ormond Beach, Steve Glassman; from Orlando, Bob Truluck; Naples, Karen Harper; from Fort Myers Beach, Allan Pedrazas; from Pine Island, Randy Wayne White; from Sarasota, Stuart Kaminsky and Wayne Barcomb; from Tampa, Tim Dorsey and Diane Vogt; from Newberry, Aileen Schumacher; from Wewahatchka, Michael Lister, and from Tallahassee, Judge Terry Powell Lewis and S.V. Date.

The list keeps growing. In only a decade the Florida Chapter of the Mystery Writers of America has become the third largest state chapter in the country, listing roughly 200 members. Each March the chapter conducts SleuthFest, the largest mystery writing conference in the country. More than 300 writers, published and unpublished, are expected for the 2004 conference in Fort Lauderdale.

Each year MWA awards Edgars—short for Edgar Allan Poe—to the writers of the best books, stories, plays and screenplays. In 2003 Florida produced two winners—

Jonathan King, whose first novel, *The Blue Edge of Midnight*, won as best first novel, and T.J. MacGregor, whose *Out of Sight*, took the honors for best paperback original. Trish MacGregor joins her husband Rob MacGregor to form the state's first husband-and-wife team of Edgar winners. Rob had won in 1996 for best young adult novel.

In 2002, Kristy Montee and her sister Kelly Nichols writing as P.J. Parrish had their book *Dead of Winter* nominated for Best Paperback Original. The book was also nominated for an Anthony Award. Stuart Kaminsky, Stuart Woods, Elmore Leonard, Lynne Barrett (FIU faculty) and the late Lawrence Sanders have won Edgars, while a number of Florida writers have been honored with nominations, including Barbara Parker, Edna Buchanan, Daniel Keyes, Allan Pedrazas, humorist Dave Barry, and David Hagberg aka Sean Flannery.

In addition, *Crime Fiction and Film in the Sunshine State: Florida Noir*, edited by Steve Glassman and Maurice O'Sullivan, was a finalist in the Best Critical/Biography category.

Michael Connelly, a former Sarasota and Fort Lauderdale resident, won an Edgar in 1993—but for a book set in Los Angeles. After a series of excellent California novels he has now moved back to Tampa giving us hope for a Florida set-

ting in a future book.

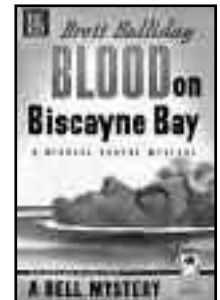
Elaine Viets, whose Francesca Vierling series was set in the author's hometown, St. Louis, finally decided after seven years in Hollywood, Florida, that the time had come to write a Florida series. The result was her *Dead-End Job Mysteries*, heavily laced with her delightful off-the-wall sense of humor.

"It was a good move for me," she said. "As soon as I started writing about Florida, my sales went way up."

Viets was nudged into her new series by Joanne Sinchuk, proprietor of Murder on the Beach, a seven-year-old mystery bookstore in Delray Beach. "Somebody needs to write humorous Florida mysteries from the woman's point of view, and you're the one," Sinchuk told her.

As far as Sinchuk is concerned, Florida writers can't turn out their books fast enough to suit her. She limits her internet sales to Florida books—and these now constitute forty percent of her volume.

"I have customers who place across



the board orders for any Florida crime fiction," she says. "My second biggest individual buyer comes from a very cold place—Norway."

The boom in Florida mysteries promises to continue unabated. Many of today's most talented writers are young. Furthermore they are energized by an active mystery writers' community and excellent creative writing schools. But it's the Florida "state of mind" that's the real ace in the hole for local writers—and their fans. 2

Stuart McIver, a former president of the MWA's Florida chapter, is the author of Death in the Everglades, a fact crime book about America's first environmental murder.