

# Investing in Dreams

BY BARBARA O'REILLEY

**B**EFORE LAUNCHING the Florida Book Award program in 2006, Wayne Wiegand visited several other states to learn how their book competitions worked. The Commonwealth Club of California, sponsor of that state's program, provided a special tour that left him inspired.

"I was conducted into a two-story atrium lined with shelves holding the books that had won the California Book Awards over the previous 75 years," recalled Wiegand, now retired as an emeritus professor of library and information studies at Florida State University. "My guide led me to one bank of shelves, picked out a book, opened it to the title page, and placed it in my hands. I quickly realized I held a first edition of the 1940 Pulitzer Prize-winner *Grapes of Wrath*, inscribed: 'To the Commonwealth Club of California, John Steinbeck.' The thought immediately crossed my mind that someday, perhaps not in the far distant future, I might hold a Florida Book Award winner that also won a Pulitzer."

That dream came true this year: *Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America*, by Gilbert King, received a Florida Book Award gold medal—and a 2013 Pulitzer Prize. Read this powerful book, and you'll understand why. With page-turning intensity, it tells the story of Thurgood Marshall's role in seeking justice for four young black men accused

of rape by a white woman in a small Central Florida town in 1949. FORUM writer Jon Wilson interviewed King about delving into this chapter of Florida history. Read his gripping account in the coming pages.

Another of this year's FBA recipients also won a top national award: *Live by Night* by bestselling author Dennis Lehane won an "Edgar" from the Mystery Writers of America. In it Lehane tells the story of 1920s rumrunners in Tampa's Ybor City. While this is Lehane's first Florida-based book, his connection with Florida doesn't start here. He actually honed his writing craft as a college student in Florida. Learn more in our article by writer Lee Irby.

In addition to King and Lehane, you'll meet more than 20 other FBA honorees in the coming pages and see samples of their work. You'll also get to know Enid Shomer, who received the 2013 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, sponsored by the Florida Humanities Council. The multitalented Shomer writes poetry, short stories, and novels with great insight and wit. She cites Florida as a central inspiration, as our article by writer Kathleen Ochshorn points out.

And don't miss poet David Kirby's description of his favorite Florida place (with its ghost galleons, sails flapping in the breeze) or Edgardo Dangond's account of yearning for a taste of home after his family moved here from Colombia.



Photo by Stacy Ferris

Some of this year's award-winning books on display in the Governor's Mansion.



Enid Shomer speaks at the Florida Book Awards luncheon in the Governor's Mansion in March—and receives a standing ovation.

As in past years, FBA recipients got together at a luncheon hosted at the Governor's Mansion and coordinated by FBA co-directors Andrew and Lisa Frank and executive committee chair Gloria Colvin.

There was a special moment this year when Enid Shomer received a standing ovation after her remarks in accepting the Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing. Shomer discussed how to put a dollar sign on what the arts are “worth.”

Read our excerpt of Shomer's remarks below—and enjoy the rest of this issue.

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Photos by Stacy Ferris

*As someone who has spent her life teasing truth and beauty and therefore justice from words, I can tell you that the reason the impact of the arts is so difficult to measure is because they are, on the one hand, quite literally beyond rubies and pearls. The arts are a human flowering that enriches all our lives; they are the engine that drives our dreams and shapes our mythology. They provide the narratives that help us to understand ourselves. It's often said that people read fiction to learn how to live; that they listen to music to feel grief and joy, but at one remove. I personally believe that all of that is true, and that we love the arts because they allow us to experience strong emotions in a safe way. Of course, this is part of how they entertain us.*

*On the other hand, and paradoxically, while the arts are beyond price, so important as not to be for sale, we know from solid economic research that every dollar spent on*

*arts funding generates ten dollars in the economy at large. That's a spectacular return. More than in any business I know of—at least any legal business! And in addition to this measurable growth, investment in arts and artists, in writers, composers, painters, dancers, museums, etc., gives a huge social return as well, adding definition and detail to our aspirations, and wisdom and depth to our understanding. The arts make us better people, more capable of sympathy and empathy. Without the arts, it's much easier to dismiss other people's suffering. It's only through story, whether in journalism or cinema or a novel, that we learn the specifics that mitigate against snap judgments of each other. I hope you'll keep on believing in and lobbying for public funding of all the arts. They are good for our souls and great for the economy.*

—ENID SHOMER

# Enid Shomer's fictional worlds reflect a poet's eye

By KATHLEEN OCHSHORN

**E**NID SHOMER STEPS OUT OF HER SUNROOM and into her verdant garden, her tiny dog Mink at her side. Surrounded by her vegetable patch, her Meyer lemon, her trumpet tree in bloom, she seems the quintessential Floridian. She says her writing would be quite different if she'd lived somewhere else, and describes Florida as "a central inspiration."

This deep sense of place is reflected in an exquisite evocation of locale in her novels, short stories, and poems. In her first collection of stories, *Imaginary Men*, one character says of the Suwannee River, "I've drunk the water, eaten the fish, picked my way through the poison ivy and stinging nettles, and danced away from the snakes. I love it the same way a person comes to love her own body or a close relative—not with a sense of choice but with a sense of destiny."

Shomer, this year's recipient of the Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, has lived more than two-thirds of her life in Florida (in Miami, Cedar Key, Gainesville, Tallahassee, and Sanibel—and currently in Tampa). In accepting the honor in March at a luncheon in the Governor's Mansion, she said, "We Floridians live in a fabulously dynamic place with an amazing natural and social landscape. It makes me very happy to be able to give back through my work to the place and people that have nurtured me."



Florida First Lady Ann Scott, left, and Secretary of State Ken Detzner present the Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing to Enid Shomer in March at the Florida Book Awards luncheon in the Governor's Mansion.

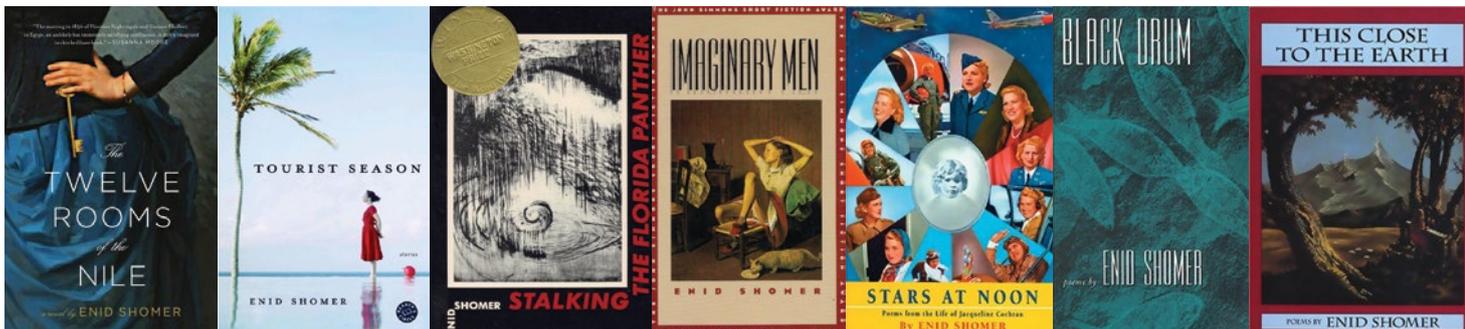
The first woman to receive this award, Shomer also happens to focus on women's lives in much of her writing. "Women's stories are not as well known," she says. "They are still evolving in an elemental way. It hasn't been that long since we gained control of our bodies. The roles of men are changing too."

In *Tourist Season*, her second story collection, she characterizes women tourists in a variety of ways—some wildly imaginative. One woman wakes up younger each day; another is called upon by Tibetan messengers who announce that she's a reincarnated Buddhist saint; others are gathered at a Las Vegas convention on gay, pop-culture-themed erotica. This book, published in 2007, won the gold medal

for fiction in the Florida Book Awards competition that year and was selected for the Barnes and Noble "Discover Great New Writers" series.

Remarkably, Shomer is an equally accomplished poet, having published four full-length books of poetry and two chapbooks. Of her book *Stalking the Florida Panther*, former U.S. Poet Laureate Maxine Kumin wrote: "To enter here is to be met and be moved by the gambling father, the long-lost lover, a Jewish child's version of Jesus, women at the tomato packing plant, and Old World ancestors, all fully realized."

Whether inspired by complex family histories, the art of Balthus or Klimt, the wild plum tree, or a luncheonette in Live Oak, Shomer's



# “SWEETHEARTS”

## A STORY IN TOURIST SEASON

BY ENID SHOMER

poetry hums with sensuality, deep emotion, and the best kind of braininess, which elevates with insight. She writes in the poem “A Floridian Swimming in Brooklyn” of “a woman whose days are spent in the depths of language,” much like herself.

Shomer’s work is now also reaching an international audience. Her most recent novel, *The Twelve Rooms of the Nile*, is not set in Florida, although she says her depiction of the Nile River was influenced by her love of Florida waterscapes. In it she writes, “...the Nile lapped like molten pewter touched with rivulets of gold.” This book, named as one of the six best historical novels of the year by National Public Radio, traces the parallel journeys that British nursing pioneer Florence Nightingale and French novelist Gustav Flaubert took in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century and envisions a friendship between the two.

Her poet’s eye for rich comparison, detail, and sensory imagery pervades all her work. In her fiction, she gives us characters who imagine a change in their lives, who populate a landscape fully rendered. Whether depicting Flaubert visiting a brothel, or retirees in conquistador bibs dining on an early-bird Florida lobster special, Shomer shows the reader a world with humor and insight.

Her accomplishments are more exceptional, given that she didn’t start writing seriously until she was in her late 30s and is just in her 60s now. She considers herself a self-taught writer, though she does credit her undergraduate education at Wellesley College in Massachusetts with giving her a remarkable foundation.

In accepting her recent lifetime achievement award, she spoke of the central role Florida has in her life: “Florida has never failed to stimulate my imagination and evoke my gratitude.”

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**A**T FIVE O’CLOCK ON A BALMY MAY AFTERNOON, Garland McKenney and her dog, Judy, scrambled down the levee to the backyard dock and into the family motorboat. Graduation was a week away and Clarence had something special planned for her at his fish camp deep in the bayou, where the Sweetheart River converged with the land. She was thrilled by the invitation. He’d never even shown the place to his wife. His innermost sanctum would soon be open to her.

It had been raining for weeks and the river was brown with tannin from the run-off upstream. Garland loved it like that—dark as a cup of brewed coffee. Against the solid blue of the sky, a quarter moon hung like a chalk mark.

She had been boating or swimming on this part of the Sweetheart all of her life. She knew it so well she could chart her progress in the shoreline’s reflection—in the tree trunks laid out like submerged catwalks, the leafy treetops knitting together, then unraveling.

She reached a granddaddy cypress with the first bandanna (red for a left turn, blue for right, Clarence had said) and took the branch to Tate’s Inlet, a familiar stretch dotted with floating fish camps. Trailing her hand in the water, she ticked off the structures fastened to rafts and barges as they bobbed into view: the abandoned A-frame infested with squirrels, the fake log cabin, the garish pink Victorian with gingerbread trim. After the last one disappeared around a curve, two blue bandannas appeared in quick succession. Two turns into twisting meanders, and she found herself on a part of the river she didn’t recognize.

The creek narrowed into a choke of weeds. Garland ducked under a dense overhang of tupelo branches and cut the motor. In the sudden stillness, Judy, a muscular pit bull mix, snapped at a dragonfly and rose on her hind legs, poised to jump overboard. “Down, girl!” Garland commanded. Judy was a strong swimmer, but Garland knew that water moccasins and cottonmouths hunted in the sluggish shallows.

Just beyond the tangle of vegetation, the bow of a partially submerged john boat stuck out of the mud, the locals’ version of a NO TRESPASSING sign. It was rumored that drug dealers and moonshiners strung steel wire across their creeks, that people had been slashed and even beheaded for venturing too far into the Sweetheart. She broke off a tupelo branch and waved it around, like a magician proving no strings were attached, then punched the motor and proceeded upstream. She looked at her watch: seven-thirty. It would be dark soon, and she had no idea how much farther the camp was.




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From *Tourist Season* © 2007 by Enid Shomer