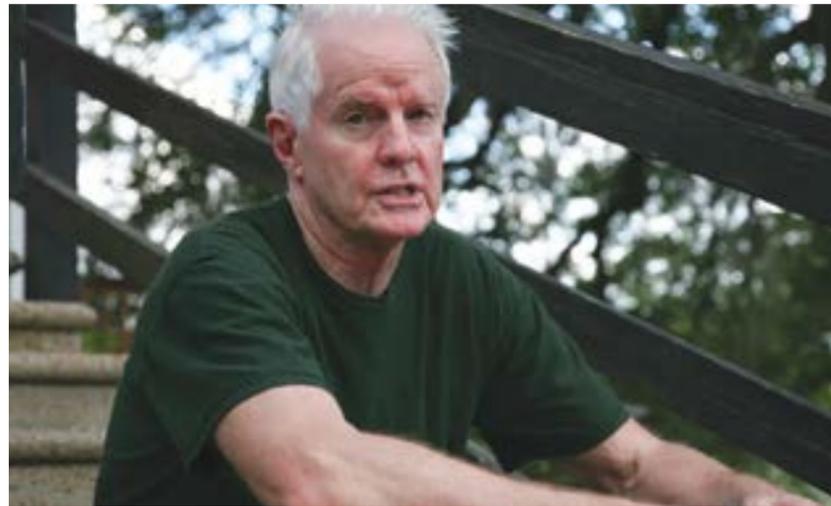


David Kirby

'A witty guide and generous soul'

Photos courtesy of David Kirby



Kirby, who grew up on a South Louisiana farm, has taught at FSU since 1969.

David Kirby has been called a literary treasure of our state. This year he received the Florida Humanities Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, the latest in a galaxy of honors he has earned during a sparkling career.

Kirby, an internationally recognized poet and essayist who has taught and inspired thousands of Florida students and writers, says his love for the written word had its roots on the 10-acre South Louisiana farm where he grew up. There (as you will learn in the accompanying Q&A), he absorbed nature, communed with animals, and met quirky Cajun characters. His storytelling mother told him tales about voodoo spells and people who lived in trees. His father was a medievalist college professor who could read 12 languages and speak many of them.

All those elements—and others, including a bout with a dreaded childhood disease—combined to inspire his love of writing at age 5.

“Seeing my hand clutching an oversized pencil and watching words spool out of the tip of that pencil onto that rough, gray paper we had, and listening to stories of my mom on our porch, made me feel like storytelling was a great form of capital...I never thought of it as part of schoolwork, it was just what we did.”

His work includes poetry, essays, criticism, and children’s literature. His biography of Richard Penniman—better known as Little Richard—defined one of rock ‘n’ roll’s earliest architects.

Kirby, who received his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University, has taught since 1969 at Florida State University, where he is the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of English. The judges for the Lifetime Achievement Award praised him for mentoring thousands of students over the years as well as for demonstrating to all “how craft, humor, and insight can create enduring works of art.” They added: “David makes us feel fortunate that we can be in the company of such a witty guide and generous soul.”

Sometimes serious, often humorous, here is Kirby in his own words:

Please tell us about your background growing up on a farm in South Louisiana, near Baton Rouge. What was your childhood like? Who were the influential people in your life? How do you think the culture of that distinctive area (which includes Cajun country) informs your outlook?

I’ve always felt as though I had three parents. My mom and dad were older when they had me. And to say there was no helicoptering in those days is an understatement: the aircraft itself was barely known, and certainly no one hovered over yours truly. Instead, my folks turned me loose in the vast acreage that surrounded our house, and it was there that I learned to observe, to entertain myself, to engage with people and animals. So that farm was my third parent. We lived on the border of Cajun country, which featured some of the oddest, sweetest people I ever met, ones who showed me how you could be responsible and trustworthy yet reach for the fiddle and the whiskey jug when you needed to (which was every Friday and Saturday night, at least).

What drew you to writing? How did you get started? Why are you attracted to the written word and to the nuances of language?

I remember writing before I remember remembering. I can still see my five-year-old hand scrawling on a tablet, probably trying to entertain my mother but also just wanting to figure things out. I had polio when I was a little kid, which gave me a lot to think about.

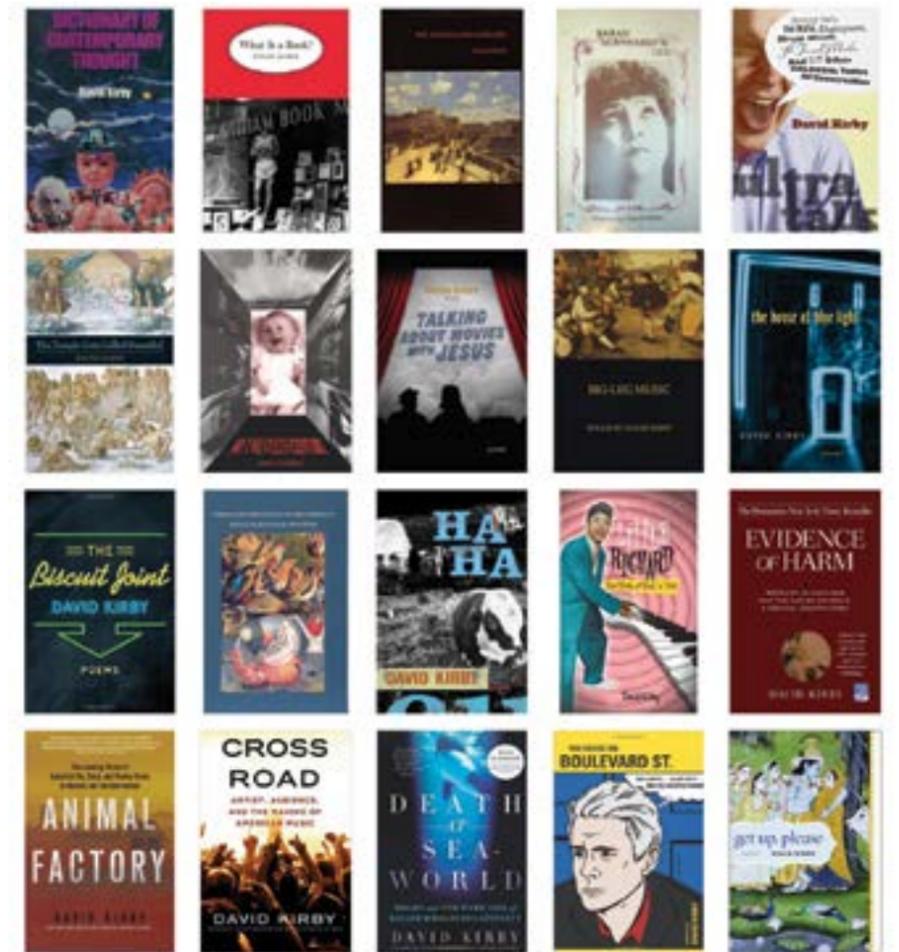
Polio also made me realize I’d better learn how to have fun, because it was apparent early on that life consisted of a lot more than free movies and popcorn.

Although you are known most widely for your poetry, you also write essays, literary criticism, children’s literature—and even a biography of rock legend Little Richard. What is your favorite form of writing—and why?

Oh, poetry’s just the best. Poetry is where the true freedom is. I’ll always work in the other genres, just as I won’t have a tuna sandwich for lunch every day. But I’ll always come back to poetry.

What are your current areas of interest? What would you say are some of the main areas of interest and themes running through your work over the years?

Well, it’s always interesting to look back and see how things have changed, isn’t it? I used to write fairly traditional twenty-line poems, but everyone was doing that, so I started writing the big fellows. And it’s funny: editors would say “nice poem” about the traditional ones, but they either loved or hated the big guys, so I knew I was on the right track. I’ve always seen the world as a pretty amusing place, so I don’t know that my themes have changed that much over the years, though



Just some of the covers of Kirby’s numerous books of poetry, essays, criticism, and children’s literature.



Kirby and wife Barbara Hamby, also an acclaimed poet and FSU professor, enjoy the cuisine during a trip to Japan.

recently there has been more tenderness in my writing, more awareness of the world’s beauty. Oh, and just recently, I’ve started writing short poems again.

Those who know your body of work describe it as serious—often including deeply profound observations and insights. Yet you are known for your witty, engaging personality and entertaining style of public speaking, as well as for hilarious wit in some of your poems. Some might even describe you as a humorist. Would you discuss these contrasting perceptions? How you see yourself as a writer?

That’s an easy question for me. Here’s the deal (1) I do use slapstick humor in maybe half my poems, but I also use irony, dry wit, tragedy, pathos, bathos, and everything else in the poetic toolbox. I want to build a real roller coaster for you so you can experience as many highs and lows as possible. Now (2) if you read much contemporary poetry, you realize that most poets are pretty sober. There are actually a fair number of poets who use comedy from time to time, and you’ll find a good many of them in *Seriously Funny: Poems About Love, Death, Religion, Art, Politics, Sex, and Everything Else*, an anthology I co-edited with my wife, the beloved Barbara



David Kirby, at the Florida Book Awards banquet in April, accepts a whimsical painting of rock 'n' roll legend Little Richard—subject of one of his books. Kirby is recipient of the 2016 Florida Humanities Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing.

Hamby. But as I say, most poets are pretty stone-faced, so most readers think of most poetry as joyless. Therefore (3) I'm always hearing, "Oh, David Kirby is the funny poet." But I'd say no, David Kirby is the poet who tries to make sure you get the full roller coaster ride.

You have been a professor at Florida State University for 45 years and are highly respected and lauded as a teacher and mentor of young writers. What have you learned about teaching and what is your philosophy about how to mentor writers? What advice would you give to budding writers?

Teaching is like anything else; you just have to do the heck out of it and let it show you what your style is. Mine is to know everything I can about the subject, lighten all that freight with a joke from time to time, and, mainly, to be enthusiastic: for my subject, for my students, for myself. After that, it's just time. Time, time, time. Spend as much quality time as you can with your students, and they'll get better. Spend as much quality time as you can with your poems, and they'll get better, too. And you will as well.

What do you think the role of a poet is in our society? What do you think it should be?

Have you seen that Woody Allen movie *Stardust Memories*? At the end, Woody's character asks this space alien what he should do to be a better person, and the alien says, "Tell funnier jokes." That's our job: grow better crops, build better houses, play better songs, write better poems. Don't worry about the rest of it. I always tell my students to take a self-inventory every few years. If you avoid the things you can't do well or don't like to do, which are usually the same, then you can spend your whole time being good at something that others will appreciate and that will be a reward in itself. The poet William Matthews says, "Life is fun when you're good at something / good." But not everybody has to be a poet; you just have to do something worth doing.

Of Prayers and a DJ: Savor these samples of David Kirby's work:

Praying by Doing, Classroom Edition

BY DAVID KIRBY

In the summer of 1825, young Ralph Waldo Emerson took a break from his theological studies to work on his Uncle Ladd's farm near Newton, Mass. There he met a laborer known to history only as "a Methodist named Tarbox," who told Emerson "that men were always praying, and that all prayers were granted." The idea of constant prayer was not new to Emerson, writes his biographer, Robert D. Richardson Jr., but Emerson "first felt its force for real life" there in his uncle's fields.

What is prayer? In its simplest form, prayer is an address to a deity. But in "Self-Reliance," Emerson says that "prayer is in all action": in the farmer kneeling to weed his field, for example. And clearly Emerson means mindful action: No farmer wakes at mid-morning and says, "Gee, I wonder what I should do today?"

Emerson's sense of prayer as mindful action appeals to my students at Florida State University, especially as graduation nears and the world of work beckons. I teach English, and in this job market you can say of humanities classrooms what is said often of trenches: There are no atheists there. My students are prayerful, though in the Emersonian way, which is to say they pray by doing, because they know that before they find their place in the world, they have a journey ahead of them.

When you go to an airline website to plan a trip, you're asked whether you want a one-way or a multi-city ticket. Like many humanities grads, my student Joanna, who earned her diploma in 2009, was a multi-city traveler. Joanna double-majored in creative writing and theatre. Deciding against the bohemian life of the New York playwright, she took the law-school admissions test but realized that what she really wanted to do was help others.

Her first stop was an adjunct position at a local community college. From there she went on to teach ninth grade, where she found herself mired in local bureaucracy and school politics. She could do more good by moving beyond the local level, she figured, so Joanna got a master's in higher education administration and is now in a doctoral program that she loves, preparing for a life of teaching and research devoted to improving outcomes for students at all levels.

Ben, a 2003 graduate, was also a multi-city traveler. He wrote a master's thesis, a collection of poems, under my direction but was also the lead singer of a band that signed with a major label and started touring. Ben tired quickly of the lifestyle and decided to become a teacher. However, teaching freshman comp as an adjunct at three different schools took its toll as well, so Ben enrolled in an online Ph.D. program in technical communication and is now an assistant professor at a big state university. "I wasn't able to find my identity as a scholar until I made connections with what I'd done in the past," he says. "Once I saw those connections I realized that I am still a poet and strive for the poetic, but that training informs my work in ways I never expected."

Another former student, Laura, a 2010 graduate, is what I call a one-way traveler: She knew what she wanted from the beginning, which was to get into trade publishing. Like Joanna, she wrote a creative undergraduate thesis; unlike Joanna, she headed straight to New York, where she juggled unpaid editorial work at a small press with a magazine job and taking literature classes at night. Then came her break. Laura became a publisher's assistant at a major press. At first that meant fetching coffee and answering phones, though lately her responsibilities have increased, and becoming a book editor is now on the horizon. "With every project I work on, titles that I acquire, and young agents I connect with," Laura says, "I feel this goal becoming more and more tangible." Already, she says, she has an office "with an actual door."

All three of my former students are living fulfilled, creative lives because they practiced prayer in the Emersonian manner: not kneeling to ask for something, but through mindful action. And as Tarbox promised, their prayers were answered, if not always in ways they foresaw.

Oh, and there's a third choice when you buy an airline ticket. In addition to one-way and multi-city, there's round trip. But that's the thing about praying the Emersonian way: There's no such thing as a round trip. You will never end up where you started. Tarbox knew that. He wouldn't have known what an airplane was, but he knew that all prayers are answered, that every life is transformed, even if you don't know when or how. All you have to do is keep praying.

Taking It Home to Jerome

BY DAVID KIRBY

In Baton Rouge, there was a DJ on the soul station who was always urging his listeners to "take it on home to Jerome." No one knew who Jerome was. And nobody cared. So it didn't matter. I was, what, ten, twelve? I didn't have anything to take home to anyone. Parents and teachers told us that all we needed to do in this world were three things: be happy, do good, and find work that fulfills you. But I also wanted to learn that trick where you grab your left ankle in your right hand and then jump through with your other leg. Everything else was to come, everything about love: the sadness of it, knowing it can't last, that all lives must end, all hearts are broken. Sometimes when I'm writing a poem, I feel as though I'm operating that crusher that turns a full-sized car into a metal cube the size of a suitcase. At other times, I'm just a secretary: the world has so much to say, and I'm writing it down. This great tenderness.

Kirby, as pictured recently in "Humans of FSU," a student Facebook project.



Photo by Tracy Doering