



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

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

Buchanan, 78, accepted the lifetime award April 13 at the annual luncheon honoring Florida Book Award winners, hosted by First Lady Ann Scott at the Governor's Mansion. The article at right is based on her acceptance speech, which received a standing ovation.



Buchanan with First Lady Ann Scott at the Florida Book Award luncheon April 13.



How a hopeless kid from New Jersey became Miami's 'QUEEN OF CRIME'

BY EDNA BUCHANAN

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

My text books were the newspapers my father read for the race results. I'd carry them down the street and read news stories to my grandmother at her kitchen table. She could not read English and was always shocked by the content. We lived in north Jersey where I spent all my nickels on *The New York Daily News*, *Mirror*, and the *Journal American*. That is where I

met the dark heroes of my childhood. Eagerly I followed the careers of Willie (the Actor) Sutton, the Babe Ruth of bank robbers; George Metesky, the mad bomber who terrorized New York; and Lucky Luciano, the man who organized the mob. Years later I interviewed two of them.

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

An elementary school math teacher said—in front of the entire class—that I'd be nothing, not even a good housewife, since I'd be unable to count my change at the supermarket or measure ingredients for a recipe. I was so humiliated, I never



Photo courtesy of Edna Buchanan

Childhood picture of Edna Buchanan

forgot her words. But, recipes are not my strong suit, and I *never* count my change at the supermarket. I use credit cards.

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

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

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

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

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

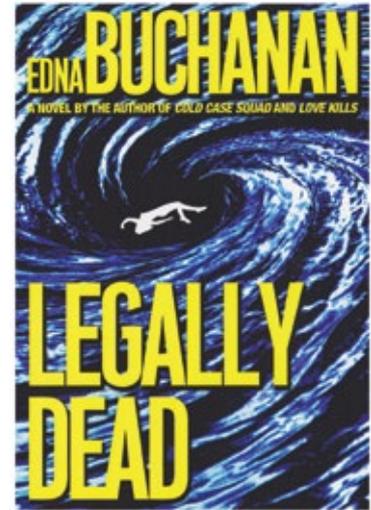
At 18, I became the youngest employee and union member at a Western Electric plant where I wired and soldered switchboards. What a gift to work with so many diverse and more experienced people, listen to their stories and share their lives! I learned far more about real life and human nature than anyone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

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

I began to job-hunt, joined a creative writing class at a local college, and could-not-stop-writing. The words flowed like a wild, rushing stream. Someone suggested I be a reporter. Great idea, I thought: I can report the news by day and work on the great American novel at night! Little did I know that daily journalism is a whirlwind that leaves no time to read a book, much less write

one. I called the *Miami Herald*, one of the nation’s best newspapers, to inquire about a job. The reply: “Unless you have a degree in journalism or five years’ experience on a daily newspaper—don’t bother.”

So I applied at the *Sun*, a small Miami Beach daily. The editor had me rewrite a press release, then asked if I had a journalism degree. “No.” Did I ever work for a newspaper? “No.” Did I write for my high school paper? What? My school had no newspaper. Had there been one, it would have needed an obit page. During my brief stint as a student, we buried half a dozen kids. My heart sank. Then he asked when I could start. “Now,” I said. He shook my hand heartily. “Congratulations! Now you’re a journalist!”



One of Buchanan's 18 books.



Photo courtesy of Edna Buchanan

Buchanan (left) visits with actor Elizabeth Montgomery on the set of “The Corpse Had a Familiar Face,” the 1994 CBS-TV movie loosely based on Buchanan’s book of the same name.



Isn't there a lot more to it than that? I wondered. The pay was lousy, but I loved it! I learned how to make up and layout pages, set hot type, and read upside down—which came in handy later. The sole reporter for months on end, it was up to me to fill the paper each day. I interviewed Frank Sinatra, Joan Crawford, and Ray Milland; covered politics when Elliot Roosevelt was mayor; loved municipal court and the police beat; wrote a column; picked the horse and dog race winners for the sports department; wrote obits; covered tragedy, comedy, heroes; and sometimes, when no one else did, I wrote the Letters to the Editor. I started at 7 a.m. each day, often worked until 1 a.m., and learned to always fill my notebook with stories.

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

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

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

A day later my phone rang with an invitation to a series of tests and interviews, one of them with

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the *Herald* shrink. "Do you ever have any irresistible impulses you find difficult to control?" His voice had a peculiar edge. I had to give him something.

"Yes." I averted my eyes.

He leaned forward, intense. "Tell me about it."

I sighed. "At least twice a week, I drive to a Dairy Queen for a Hawaiian Isle sundae with pineapple and coconut. I can't help myself." That was the best I could do on short notice. It was even true. Weeks went by. I heard nothing. The *Sun* building and presses were sold, the paper about to fold. The decision had been left to *Herald* City Editor Steve Rogers. "Dear Mr. Rogers," my new letter began. The remainder was just one word in the center of the page. "Obits?"

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

The *Herald* years were incredible. Who knew that the hopeless kid who'd lived in a rickety tenement, a rat-infested fire trap in Paterson, N.J., would go on to cover more than 5,000 violent deaths, 3,000 of them homicides—cover paradise lost, the cocaine cowboys, riots, and America's highest murder rate. Or that some of my stories would result in changes to Florida law or that I would win the Pulitzer Prize, the George Polk award, and scores of others; or be invited to the White House by Laura Bush; or lecture at newspapers, colleges, and journalism schools, even Columbia; or be profiled in *The New Yorker* by writer Calvin Trillin.

In 1981, we broke all records with 637 murders. I covered them all. My editors were not pleased. They told me to cover only “the *major* murder of the day.” I understood, but pretended not to. How do you *select* the major murder of the day? Every murder is major to the victim. They all wanted to live as much as we do. We’re all in trouble when victims become mere statistics. I believed it was vital to report them all, all of their stories, in the newspaper of record, in black and white, where they would live in our consciousness forever.

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

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

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

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

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

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

After the Pulitzer, I decided to pursue my goal since age 4 and write my novel. An editor at a major New York publishing house wanted me to write a book—a nonfiction account of covering crime in Miami. But I wanted to write a novel. He declined, and explained, “You have to have serious doubts when someone known for playing the violin suddenly announces plans to play the tuba.”

“The police beat is all about life and death and what makes people become heroes or homicidal maniacs.”

But it wasn’t sudden! It was my lifelong goal. I persisted. Doubtfully, he compromised. I wrote the book he wanted, then my novel. At last! Exhilarated, I began, but struggled, kept turning to my notebook, but it wasn’t there. My heart sank. What if I couldn’t play this tuba? But then, something happened! In the middle of Chapter Three my characters suddenly sprang to life, began to do things I never intended or even dreamed of. A few became aggressive—tried to take over the book. I had to promise one that he would return as a major character in a future novel. He became the dying detective in *Miami, It’s Murder*, which was nominated for an Edgar, as was the first novel. My characters still whisper in my ear, seek attention and demand to be heard.

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

Here are a few helpful thoughts for those who work at home alone, like me—and for everyone else as well. First, find your passion. Never give up the dream. Find your true home, the place where you belong. Learn everything you can about people, both good and evil. It’s healthy for us all, and the mother lode for writers.

Be brave. Follow your intuition, your gut feeling, that still, small voice—whatever you choose to call it. But never ignore it.

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

Real news should mirror real life. Every life matters.

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

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

EDNA BUCHANAN, recipient of the 2017 Florida Humanities Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, is currently working on her 19th book.