

State of Inspiration

EXPLORING THE WRITER'S LIFE IN FLORIDA

"I do not understand how anyone can live without some small place of enchantment to turn to,"

— Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and resident of Cross Creek, Florida

Writer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings found her muse, and her place of enchantment, under the live oaks and orange groves of her rural Cross Creek home. It was there she was inspired to write her Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Yearling*, and *Cross Creek*, which chronicled a life far different than she knew as a girl growing up in Washington, D.C.

Rawlings is but one in a procession of writers, stretching long before and after her, who have found fertile ground for their imagination and work of their lives amidst the complex wonder that is Florida.

In these next several pages, we explore the writing life in our state; we celebrate some of the writers — including this year's Lifetime Achievement Award recipient and Florida Book Award winners — and delve into what motivates them and how they pursue their craft. And we are introduced to, (or in some cases, reminded of) the books that have taken root here and are making their mark far beyond our state.

Jeff Klinkenberg: Florida's master storyteller

Observations and insights from the chronicler of 'Real Florida' — winner of the 2018 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing

By Bill DeYoung

Over the course of four decades spent talking to Floridians, asking question after question, getting his feet wet to chronicle their lives and experiences for his newspaper column, everything Jeff Klinkenberg learned came down to this: Everybody has a story.

The worm grunter, cane grinder, alligator wrestler, cattle rancher, citrus farmer and Weeki Wachee mermaid all have stories. The fisherman and the frog-gigger and the cranky woman in the roadside restaurant who makes grilled cheese sandwiches, and key lime pie to die for, with fruit right out of her back yard.

Writers and poets, amateur scientists and passionate environmentalists. Cowboys, cave divers, cooks and kooks.

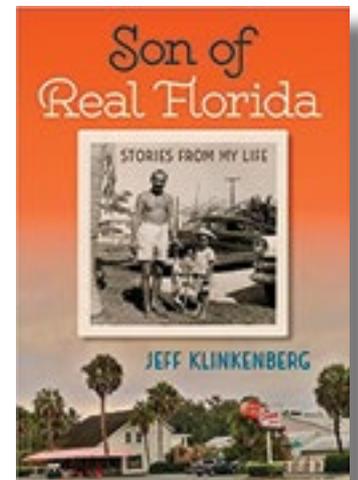
"And what makes stories good, what brings them to life, are the details," Klinkenberg always says.

Klinkenberg's "Real Florida" columns for the *St. Petersburg Times* (now the *Tampa Bay Times*), are collected (with other works) in seven books; the latest, *Son of Real Florida*, was published in March.

In April, the Florida Humanities Council honored him with the 2018 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing. A five-member panel of Sunshine State literati whittled down a list of 20 candidates, and Klinkenberg was the choice as "a writer who has explored every nook and cranny of Florida in explaining the state's history and culture."

Says bestselling novelist Carl Hiassen: "Nobody writes about the real Florida with as much insight and affection as Jeff Klinkenberg. His essays — spanning the length and breadth of this intoxicating, infuriating state — are pure gems."

"I never knew what a folklorist was until about 25 years ago," laughs Klinkenberg, who was also given the Florida Folk Heritage Award earlier



The photo on the cover of Son of Real Florida shows the author, aged 5, with his shirtless dad and a string of fish during a Key West expedition. "I owe my love of nature and Florida to him," he writes in the book.

this year, for his contributions to the state's cultural history. "And I thought ... I guess that's sort of what I am. I'm not a professional, I'm an amateur at it.

"But I'm interested in how people live, and the tools they use, and what they think is important, and the food they eat and all that stuff. And those things always change."

His role model, he explains, was *The New Yorker* scribe John McPhee. "One of the hallmarks of his stuff was this detail. And also, he was a great *idea* guy.

"I loved that he wrote off the mainstream, for the most part, and would take something that most people wouldn't think is significant and dive into it. And this whole universe would appear."

Klinkenberg's witty, warm essays took Times readers into Florida's darkest — and brightest — corners. They were vicarious journeys into the heart of the state, invitations to dance with a colorful cast of characters you weren't likely to meet on the mean streets of Orlando or Fort Lauderdale.

Once a Florida boy ...

Son of Real Florida carries the subtitle *Stories From My Life*. Although many of the chapters include material from his 38 traveling years at the Pinellas County newspaper, Klinkenberg has fashioned this one as more of a memoir.

"I lived in a house without air conditioning in Miami, and you could hear owls at night," he recalls. "When you'd get up and step outside in summer, whomp, the humidity would knock you down.

"You could be gone at 8 a.m., and not come back till 5, and your parents wouldn't worry about you. We'd be in the canal, stepping on nails and all kinds of stuff, and forget to mention it. When we were hot and sweaty and thirsty, we'd just kneel down and drink out of a mud puddle with an oil slick on top. And nothing ever happened!"

Jeff was 2 when the family left Chicago "to make a new start" in South Florida. Dad was a musician, a piano player, whose stage name was Ernie Bergen. He went where the work was and supported the family managing the kitchen at a large hotel.

Because he worked at night, he had time to spend with his son. "My dad just loved the outdoors; that was his gift," Klinkenberg says. "I grew up fishing and doing all the stuff that a lot of Florida kids did."

His natural curiosity — the thing that would lead to a career in journalism and beyond — came from Mom. "My mother had all the virtues and all the vices of the Irish," he says. "She'd go down the street with her Pall Malls and come back into the house an hour later. She'd say 'Well, let me tell you what I found out!' And she'd spin all the neighborhood gossip. It would come alive.

"So I grew up hearing a storyteller."

Interpreting Florida

He got his first job at the *Miami News* in 1966, a 17-year-old kid working stats on the sports desk, and by the time he left 10

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHERIE DIEZ



Jeff Klinkenberg has been traveling throughout Florida in search of stories for more than 40 years.

years later he was a star columnist, on the Super Bowl-winning Dolphins beat.

After he'd graduated from the University of Florida, the *Times* brought him in as an "outdoors writer," covering tarpon tournaments and sailboat regattas, in '77. After a decade of that, he'd grown tired of the endless repetition of advancing and covering events, the "how to bait your hook" stories. At the same time, he was also writing features and getting lots of positive feedback; what he enjoyed most was finding out about people. What made them tick.

"I thought 'I'm going to use this beat to write profiles of interesting people who otherwise would never get covered,'" Klinkenberg recalls. "And they were there! It was like low-hanging fruit."

He proposed that he become a "Florida culture writer," like Al Burt of the *Miami Herald*, one of his heroes. "A lot of papers had

writers like that — somebody who would interpret Florida for them in a column.”

With the *Times*' blessing, Klinkenberg hit the road. For the next 30 years, he was rarely in the office.

He generally turned in two “Real Florida” columns a week. “There were people at the *Times* taking something like two years working on a story, so I didn't feel too bad about spending a couple weeks on one,” he says. “So I began to take a little more time on some of these pieces — and that was good for the work, really, to be able to think a little bit more about what you wanted to do.”

Ideas came from everywhere — an old longshoreman, for example, would tell him about a one-armed shrimper he'd once known, and Klinkenberg would track the man down. He spent quality time with Ricou Browning, the swimming champion who wore the rubber suit in *The Creature From the Black Lagoon*, with snake-milking legend Bill Haast, with the grown-up lady who'd been the original “Coppertone” girl in billboard advertisements.

Friends constantly brought him ideas and introductions, declaring that this person or that was positively “Klinkian.”

He can't name his “favorite Floridian,” although he's often asked. Every story was as interesting to him as the one before, and the one after.

He tends to remember with fondness the real “characters,” with one-of-a-kind stories. Like Nathan Martin, the unschooled, shoeless Gilchrist County forest dweller who'd read every book in the local library; or the mysterious, chain-smoking, 7-foot-tall mullet gigger who haunted the St. Petersburg pier for decades, at night. Or the legendary cheesecake photographer Bunny Yeager. Or the guy who makes a living by diving for golf balls in South Florida water hazards, alligators be damned.

Then, of course, there are the stories he discovers at the intersection of Serendipity, Coincidence, and Dumb Luck. “I'd look at a map, for example, and notice that part of Florida was in the Central time zone,” he says. “West of the Apalachicola River. I'd think well, what's that like if you live right on that line there? So I'd go up there and spend a day or so on both sides of the line.”

Heading home, “I stop in East Point, this tiny town, to put

gas in my car. I see a sticker on the pump — it's a picture of this scary looking highway patrolman, and he's saying ‘If you steal gas, you will lose your license.’ For years, those stickers were everywhere, like 80,000 pumps in Florida.”

Nothing could have prepared Klinkenberg for what happened next. “This car pulls up at the other pump, and I don't know why, but I looked ... and it was *him*. It was the guy on the sticker! I always thought he's just an actor, right? They had to go to Central Casting to find that guy.”

Trooper Anthony Stone, out of Tallahassee, noticed Klinkenberg staring. “Yes, it's me,” he said to the flabbergasted reporter. What were the odds?

They had a long and pleasant conversation. The story, “Sticker Shock,” appeared in the *Times* on April 6, 2004.

At 68, Klinkenberg still doesn't see himself as a preservationist, recording the thoughts and deeds of a dying culture for posterity's sake. He says he'll probably never run out of questions.

He does, however, bristle when someone — usually a stranger — asks him about the contemporary “Florida Man” phenomenon, tied to news articles about bizarre and/or humorous events in the state he loves so much.

“I've come to sort of resent the Florida Man as a buffoon,” he says. “As the laughingstock for the nation. One, it distracts from some more important things about Florida, some terrifying things.

“There are too many of us here ... our water supply is threatened ... the springs have started clouding up ... but wait a minute — what about that guy who was naked?”

While he ponders these issues, he travels with his wife, Susan King, and obsesses over historic Florida art (the couple has an impressive collection of original Highwayman paintings).

They recently returned from Tuscany where they attended the wedding of his daughter Kate (he has three adult children).

Klinkenberg continues to read voraciously about Florida and to accept freelance assignments, if it's something he's curious about.

“Writers never retire,” he laughs. “You never stop thinking about it. Even if you don't do it, you never stop thinking ‘That's interesting. If I were still writing, this is what I'd do.’ So I'm thinking like that all the time.”

A “son of Florida” book list

We asked Jeff Klinkenberg for a list of books that all true Floridians should read.

Here's what he recommended:

Travels, William Bartram, 1791

Palmetto Leaves, Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1873

Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston, 1937

The Yearling, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, 1938

The WPA Guide to Florida, edited by Stetson Kennedy (among others), 1939

Palmetto Country, Stetson Kennedy, 1942

The Lion's Paw, Robb White, 1946

Everglades: River of Grass, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, 1947

The Deep Blue Goodbye, John D. MacDonald, 1964

Oranges, John McPhee, 1966

Ninety-Two in the Shade, Thomas McGuane, 1972

Condominium, John D. MacDonald, 1977

A Land Remembered, Patrick D. Smith, 1984

Tourist Season, Carl Hiaasen, 1987

The Man Who Invented Florida, Randy Wayne White, 1993

Florida: a Short History, Michael Gannon, 1993

A Naturalist in Florida, Archie Carr, 1994

Anna in the Tropics, Nilo Cruz, 2002

Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams, Gary Mormino, 2005

Shadow Country, Peter Matthiessen, 2008

Devil in the Grove, Gilbert King, 2012

The Gulf, Jack E. Davis, 2017